

FANTASTIC FOUR



*"This series is
truly special."*

— AIPT

NORTH
GÓMEZ
FIORELLI
ABURTOV

**FORTUNE FAVORS
THE FANTASTIC**

MARVEL

THE CURS OF FAITH





FANTASTIC FOUR

FORTUNE FAVORS
THE FANTASTIC

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FANTASTIC FOUR CREATED BY STAN LEE & JACK KIRBY





This looks like empty space,
but it's not. There's a chain
of *asteroids* here.
All headed for Earth...

...and all
invisible.



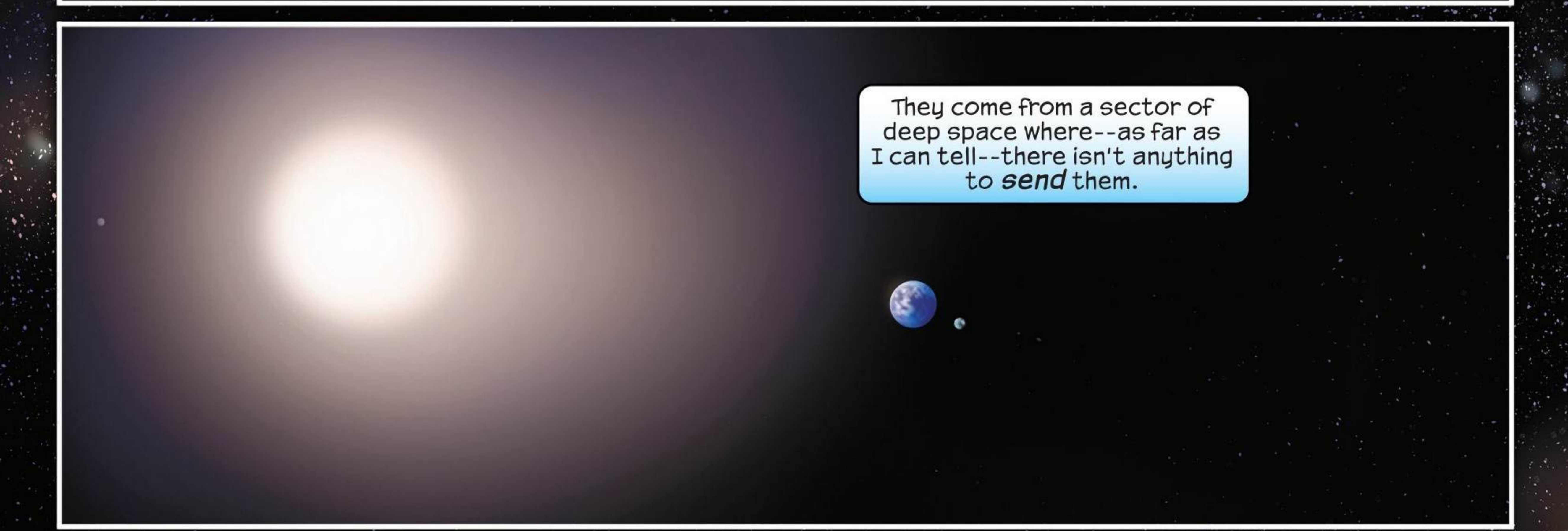
I don't know how or why.
I can't even get a clear idea
of what they're *made* of.

It's remarkable.



More remarkable still:
Every asteroid we know
about that's ever hit Earth
came from our own solar
system. The one that killed
the dinosaurs did.

But these
ones *didn't*.



They come from a sector of
deep space where--as far as
I can tell--there isn't anything
to *send* them.



It possible their origin
is from *outside* the
observable universe. At
that scale, there's no way
for me to say for sure.

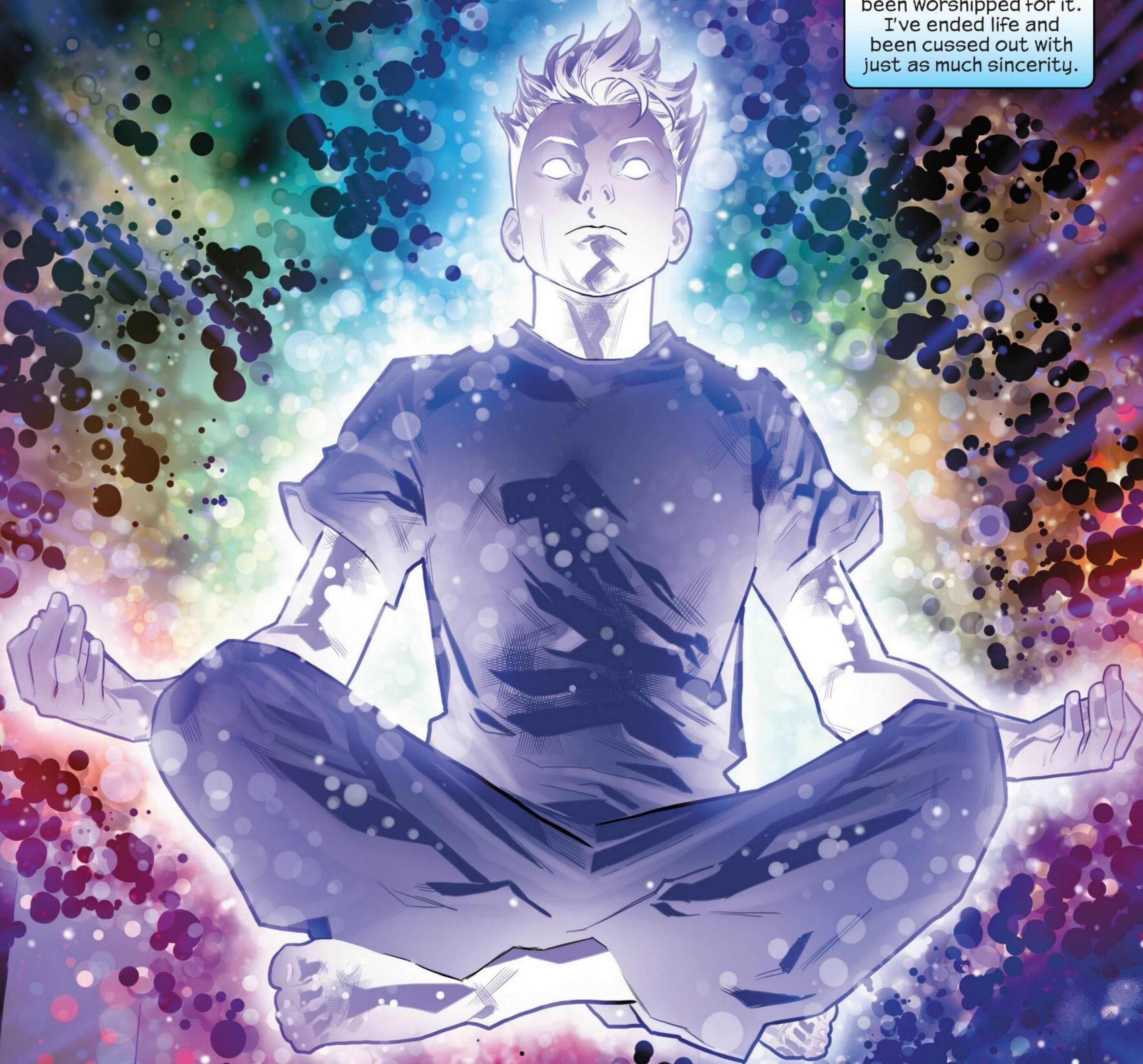
One of life's
little mysteries.

Even I can't see
everything.

I'm Franklin Richards,
and I'm one of the
most powerful beings
in the universe.

I've been an
immortal, a *god*,
an Omega-level
mutant.

I've created life and
been worshipped for it.
I've ended life and
been cursed out with
just as much sincerity.



I've been credibly told
I'm gonna be the only
one who survives the end
of this universe, the only
one who passes on into
the *next* one.

And, man,
I gotta say...



...I really just wanna be a *kid* first.

It's more than "want," actually: I know I *have* to be.

How many kids have been visited by their *future selves*, telling them all the ways things could go wrong?

How many kids have *aged* themselves up, trying to help, only to have it blow up in their faces?

You can't skip this part of your life. You need years to *learn*. To *grow*. To *become* yourself.

But with my powers, I can't *be* a kid. So a while back, I came up with a solution:

I don't let myself *have* my powers. I hide them from everyone--even *myself*.

And then once a year, I *wake up*. I remember *everything*. I look around, with my *full* powers, my unlimited, reality-altering set...

...and I see where the world is *at*.



This year, I found those invisible asteroids.

So as my family sleeps and death tears toward Earth, I take what I know about the universe...



...and what I know about my family...

...and use it to *foresee* what's going to occur.



A leads to B,
and so B leads to C,
and so C leads to D.

And so, and so,
and so.



So!

KRAKA-BOOOM!

Here's what happens *next*.



It's so quiet. Nothing lives here anymore. Nothing *survived*.

I don't care whether yer Paste-Pot Pete or th' Red Skull, Ms. Masters--what kinda super villain blows up a *forest*?

I don't believe one *did*, officers.

Evidence from the center of the impact suggests this is an *asteroid impact site*, nearly Tunguska-sized.



A hunk 'a rock big enough to do all *this* damage, and nobody *saw* it coming? None of you eggheads saw it in your fancy *telescopes*?

Creepy to see y'all just *floatin'* there...

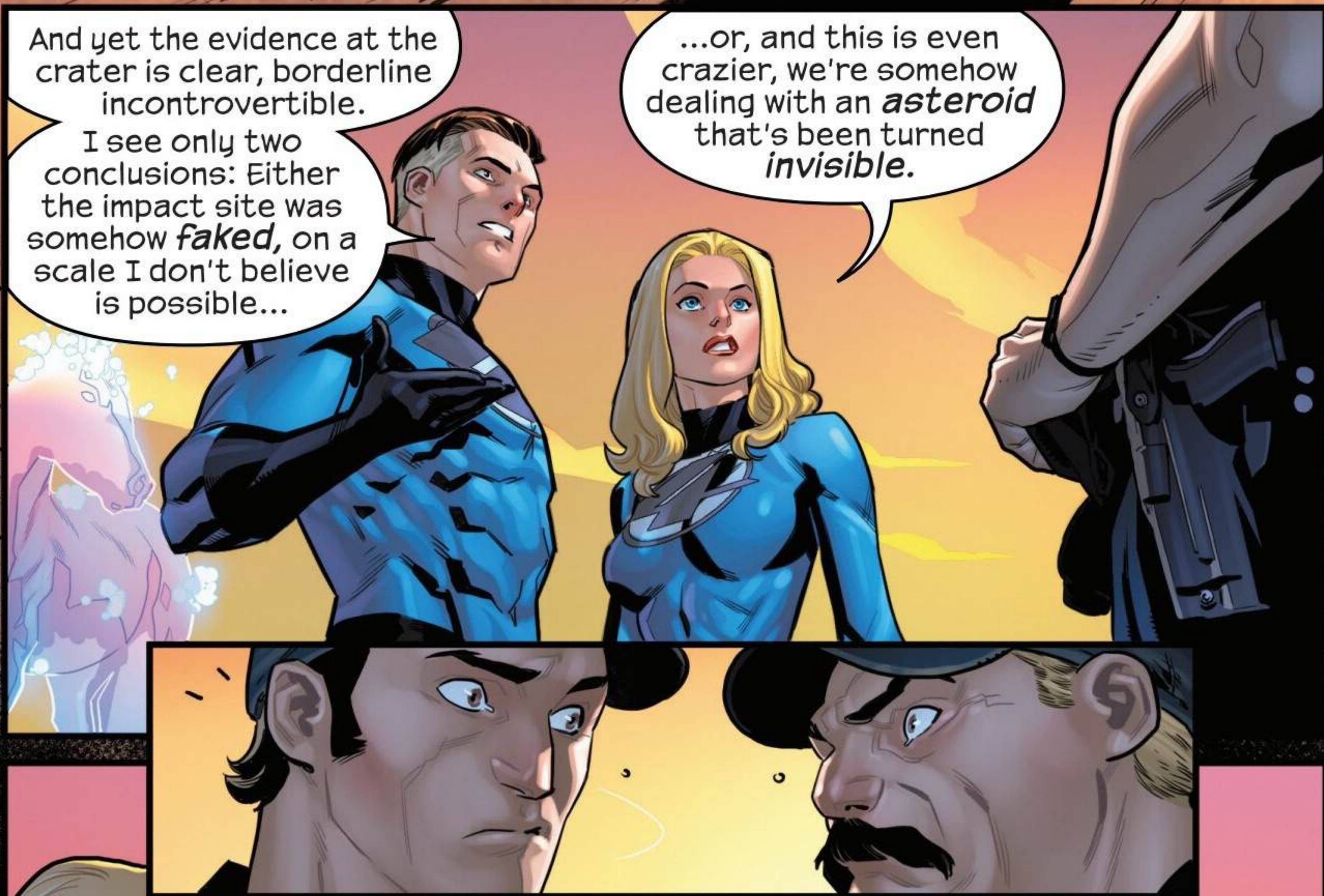
I called around. Near as I can tell, not a single astronomer or telescope saw *anything* approach Earth.

They all assure me--anything big enough to do this, they *would've* seen it coming.

And yet the evidence at the crater is clear, borderline incontrovertible.

I see only two conclusions: Either the impact site was somehow *faked*, on a scale I don't believe is possible...

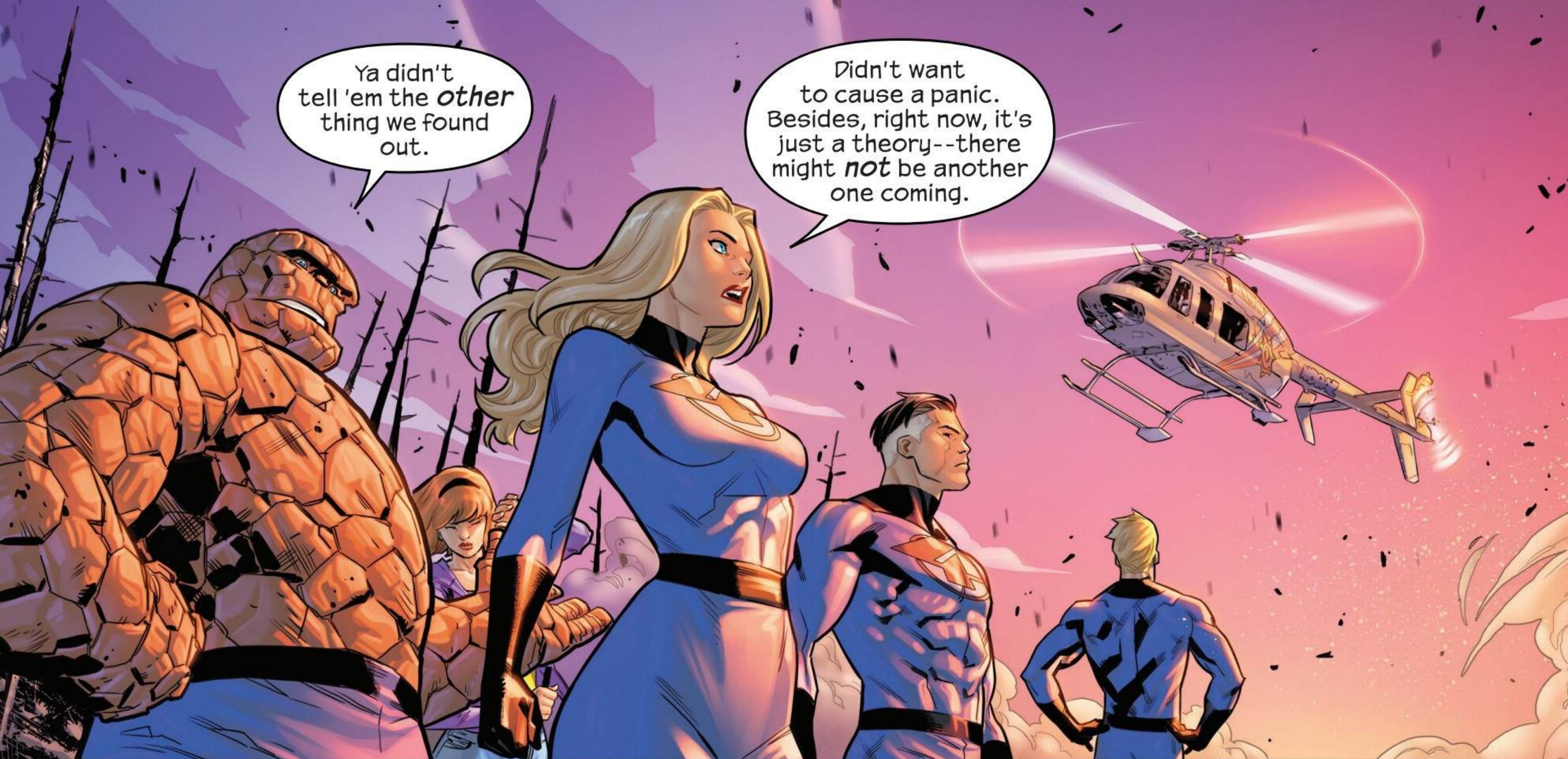
...or, and this is even crazier, we're somehow dealing with an *asteroid* that's been turned *invisible*.



We're investigating it, officers.

Do it quick. And maybe keep your little *pet theory* to yourself, Dr. Storm.

God, it's like you *wanna* be hated and feared...



Ya didn't tell 'em the *other* thing we found out.

Didn't want to cause a panic. Besides, right now, it's just a theory--there might *not* be another one coming.



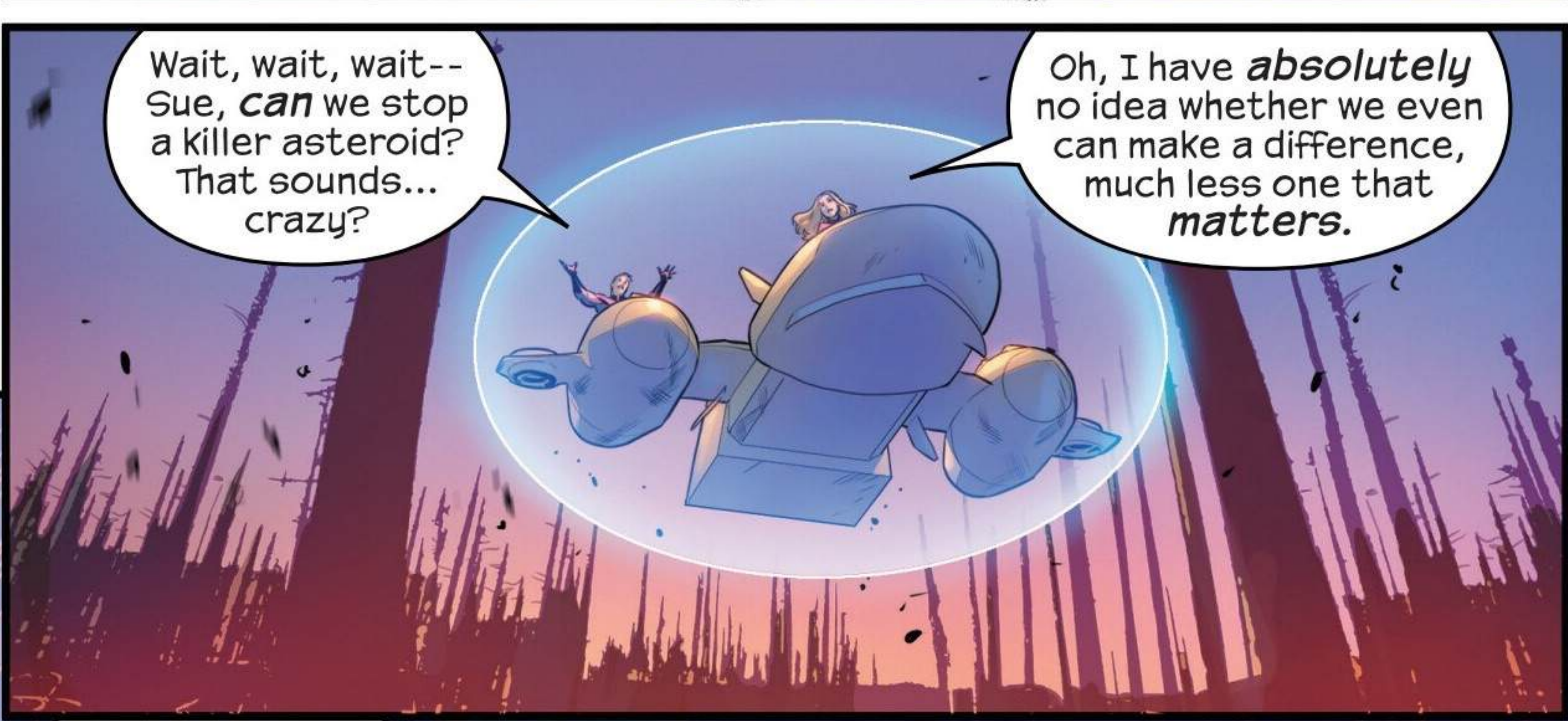
But if that shimmer Dr. Mack observed with her telescopes really *is* the result of an invisibility field, at least we know where it's likely to *hit*.

C'mon, we don't have much time.



What, to get away from the asteroid? How much time do we really need?

The other one isn't headed toward *wilderness*. There's a town there, Johnny. We're flying *toward* the projected impact site.



Wait, wait, wait-- Sue, *can* we stop a killer asteroid? That sounds... crazy?

Oh, I have *absolutely* no idea whether we even can make a difference, much less one that *matters*.



But I do know we have to *try*.

Well. No argument here, sis. What are we waiting for?

FLAME ON!

Fwooposh



And so:

I've got two force-fields up here-- a solid one around the town, and a larger, permeable one around it.

Sorry, two? Why do we need *two*?

I wuz also wonderin' that, actually.

Jonathan, can you describe the end of the reign of the dinosaurs? Before the Chicxulub asteroid impact.

Uh-- sure?

The dinosaurs were all chilling out, and maybe some of 'em noticed this big asteroid making its way silently across the sky but probably most ignored it--

--then when it hit over the horizon, there was this big explosion and they started running from the falling rocks an' fire and whatever.

That's the popular image, but it's *wrong*. The last few seconds of their reign were *normal*, Jonathan. The asteroid wasn't *invisible*, but without telescopes, it might as well *have* been.

It was screaming through space at upward of twenty kilometers a *second*-- more than fifty times the speed of *sound*.

There was no warning--no slowly glowing light in the sky, no asteroid majestically moving across the heavens. Life was simply normal one instant...

...and *Hell on Earth* the next.

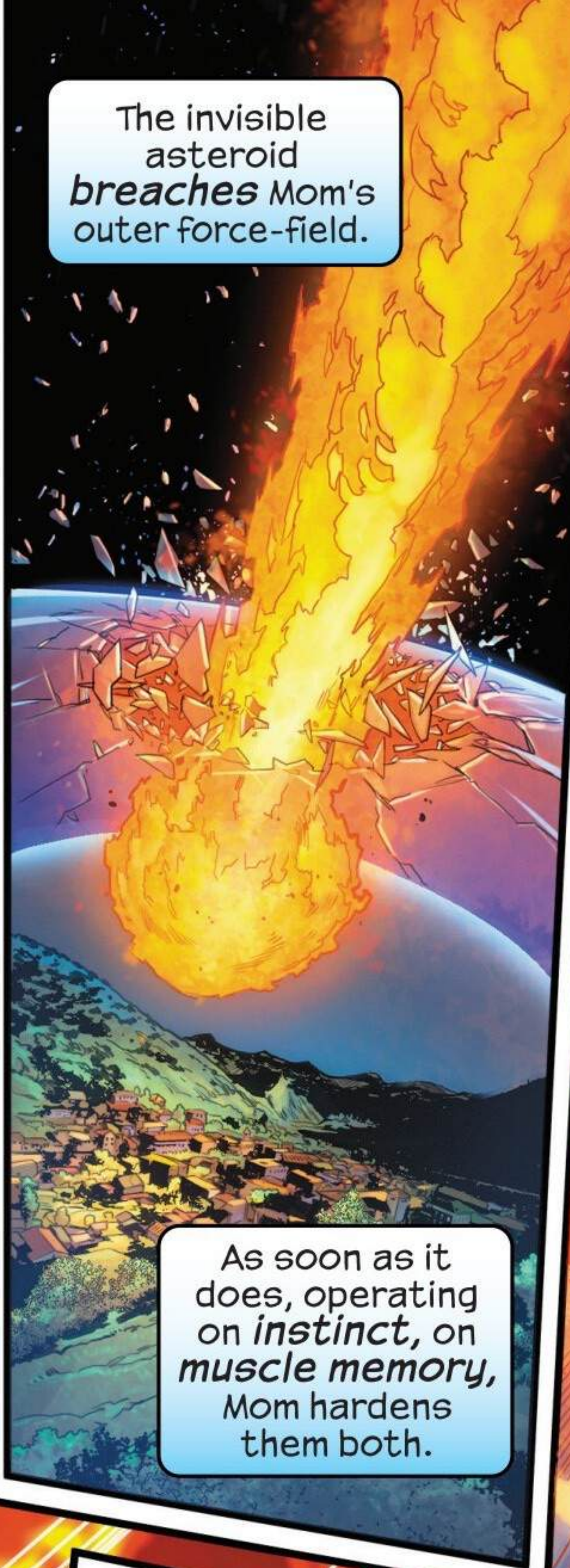
The lower shield is to protect the town--and us. The upper shield is so I can *sense* when it's close.

But whether the asteroid hits the *ground* or my *force-field*--all that energy still has to go *somewhere*.

And we don't know how big it'll be: The Chicxulub asteroid had *billions* of times more energy than an atomic bomb.

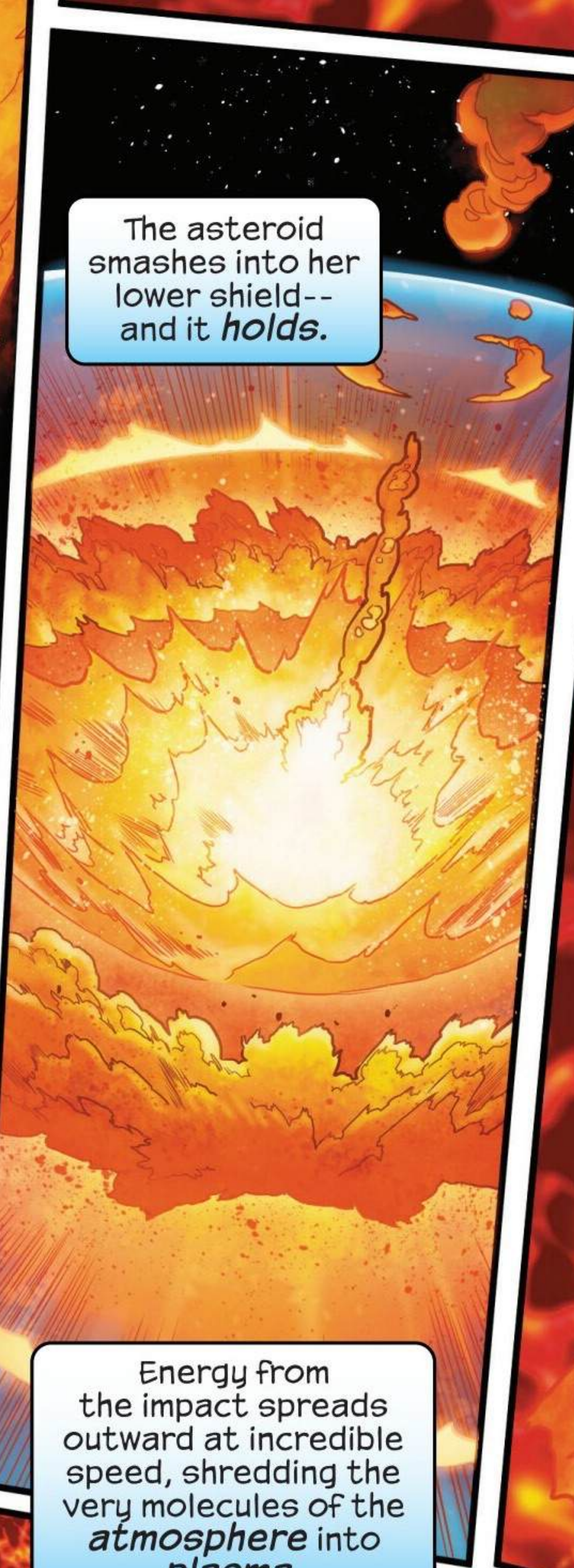
Right. We need to be able to

What happens next happens in *microseconds*.



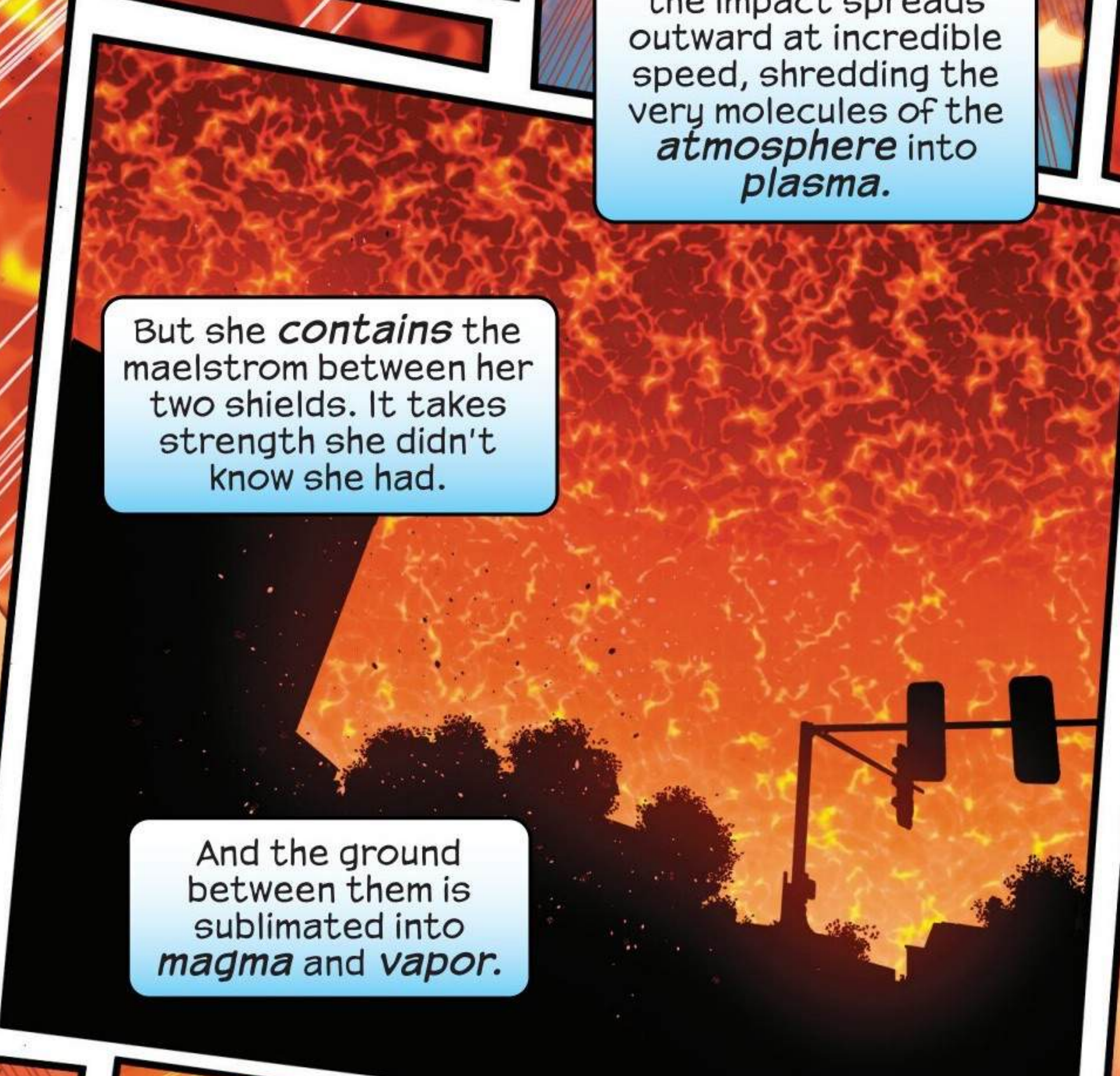
The invisible asteroid **breaches** Mom's outer force-field.

As soon as it does, operating on *instinct*, on *muscle memory*, Mom hardens them both.



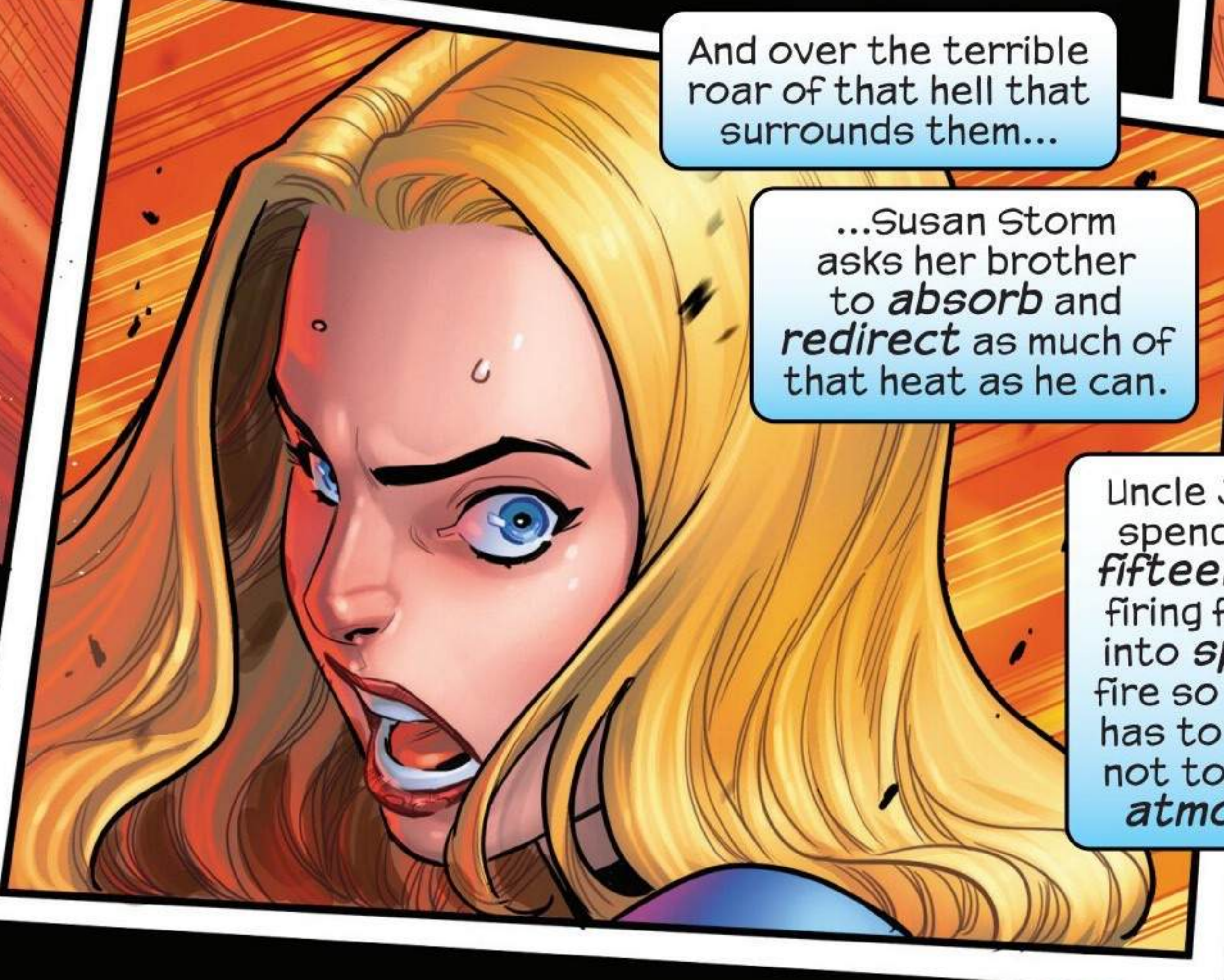
The asteroid smashes into her lower shield-- and it **holds**.

Energy from the impact spreads outward at incredible speed, shredding the very molecules of the *atmosphere* into *plasma*.



But she **contains** the maelstrom between her two shields. It takes strength she didn't know she had.

And the ground between them is sublimated into *magma* and *vapor*.



And over the terrible roar of that hell that surrounds them...

...Susan Storm asks her brother to **absorb** and **redirect** as much of that heat as he can.

Uncle Johnny will spend the next **fifteen minutes** firing flames out into *space*, with fire so intense he has to be careful not to ignite the *atmosphere*.



He's never channeled so much energy before.

He hopes he never has to again.

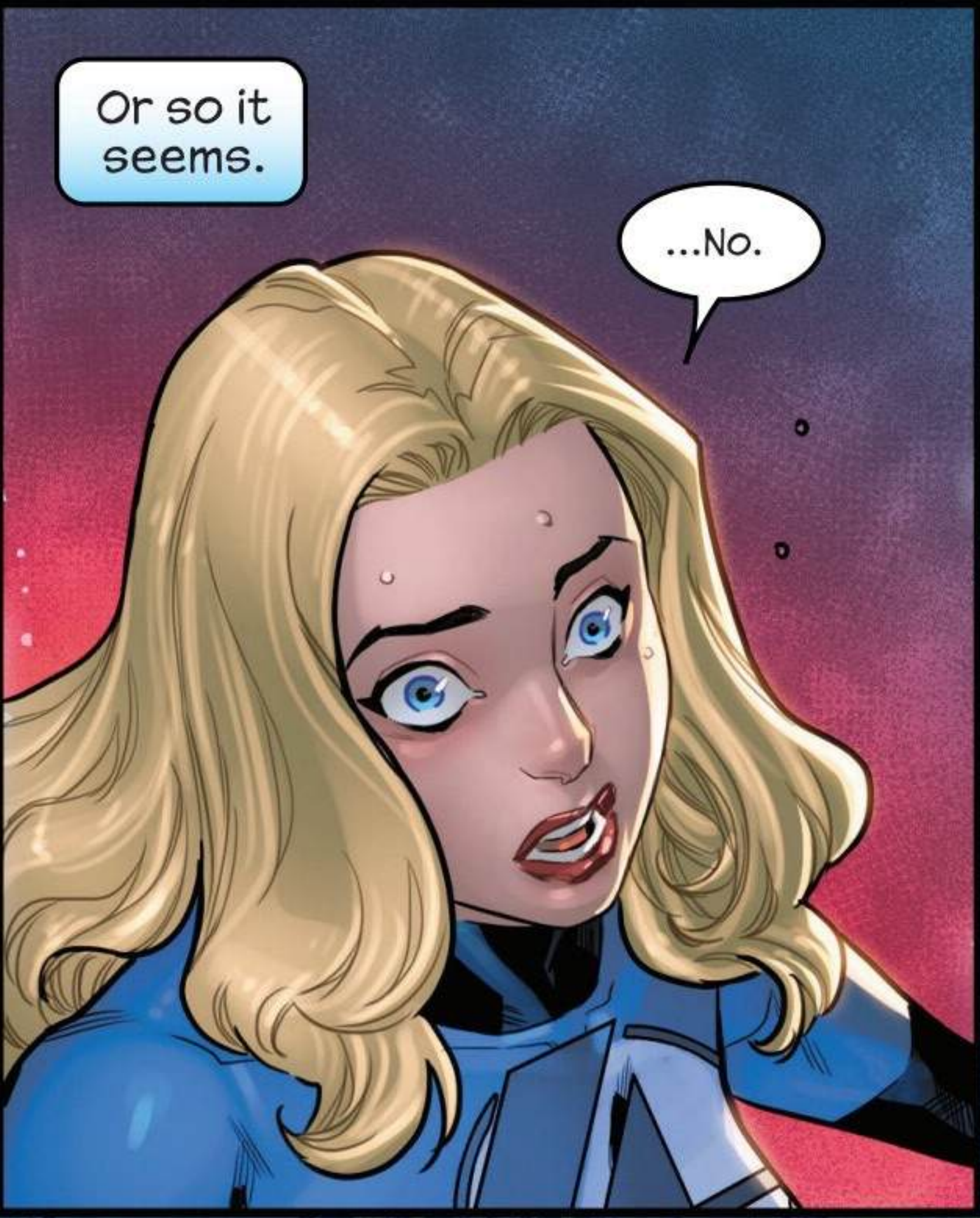
And when it's over, when the ground surrounding the town is merely molten and the air has cooled, Mom drops her force-fields...

...and finally lets herself accept that the Fantastic Four have, once again, somehow *saved* everyone.



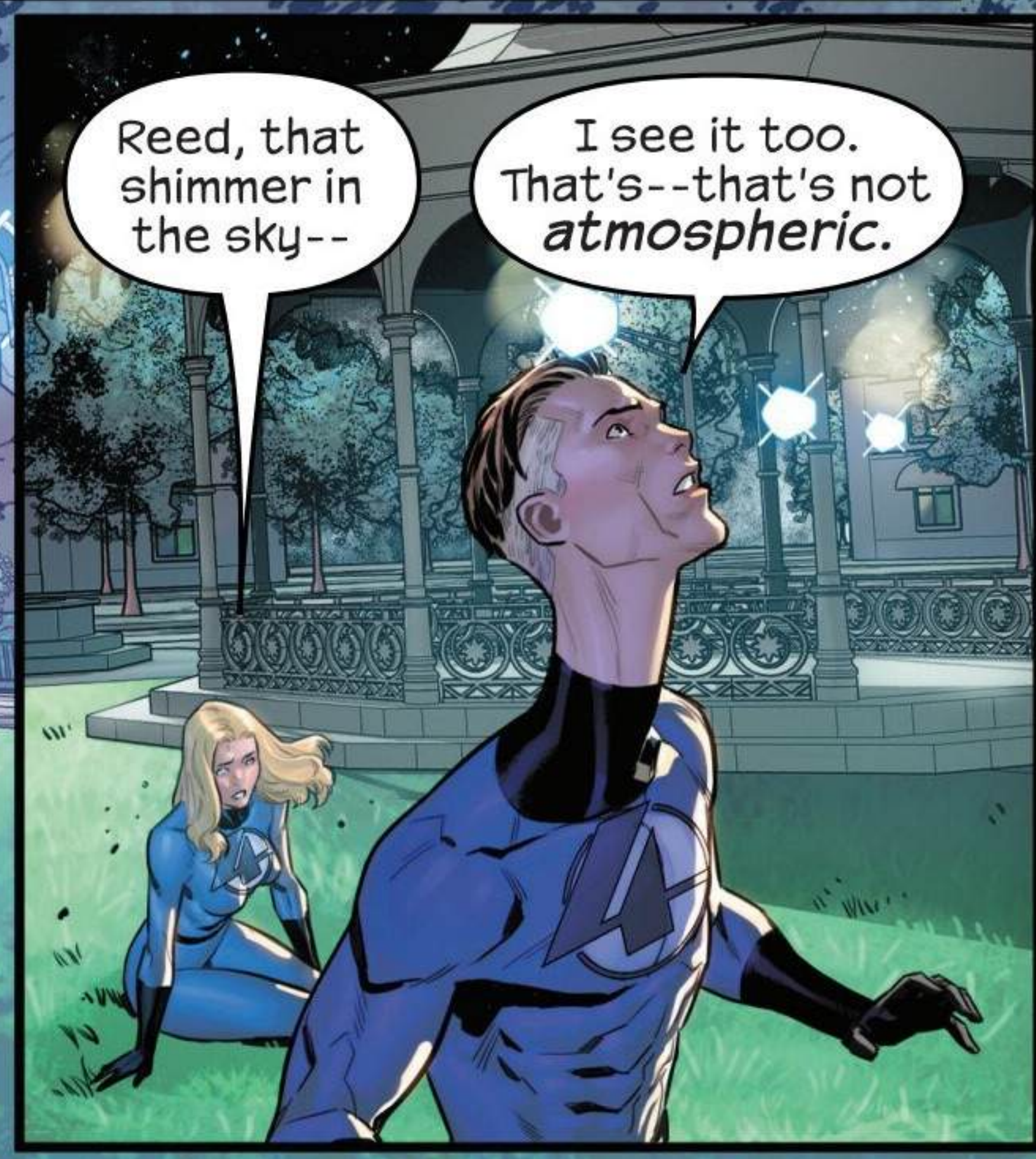
We did it?

Heck yeah, we did!!



Or so it seems.

...No.



Reed, that shimmer in the sky--

I see it too. That's--that's not *atmospheric*.



I'm estimating scale here, but--

Dear God.

That could be *dozens* of asteroids--minutes, maybe *seconds* away.



It took everything you had just to hold back *one*. We can't--

We have to, honey. We do what we can.



We do what we can.



It seems to me we need two things: a way to see the asteroids coming, and a way to slow them down.

Now, anyone here suppose they might have some *powers* to *help* wit' that?

Whatever's making them invisible, I can't cancel it out.

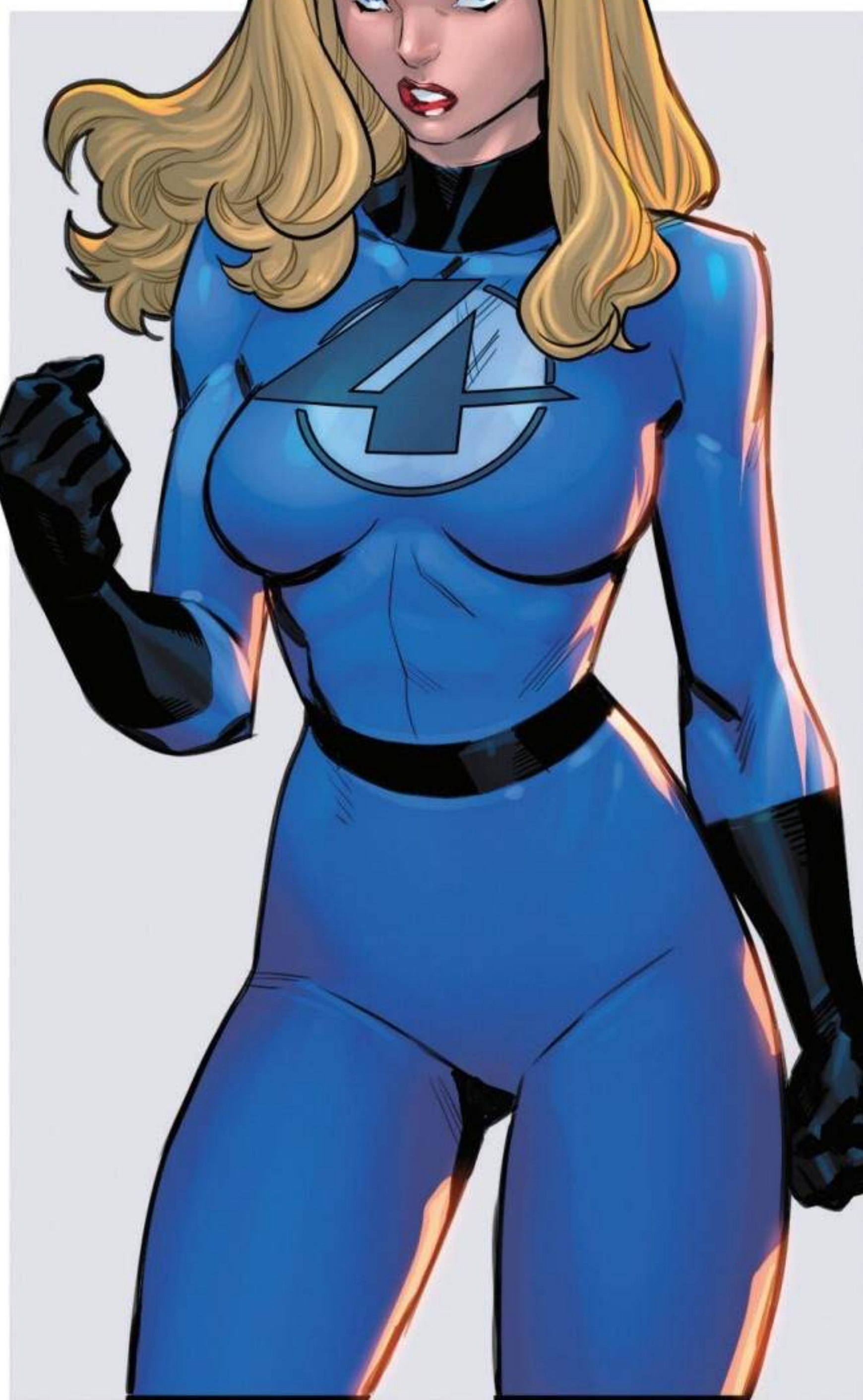


If I filled the stratosphere above us with fire, you'd see 'em moving *through* it, yeah? And I could enhance their fiery trails!

It's just a millisecond or so of warning, but...



...it couldn't hurt. Do it.



That still leaves slowin' 'em down. Sue, can you...?

I don't know. I don't--

I may be able to help with that.



I'll stretch myself out into a dome-- big as I can. I'm elastic, so if I'm lucky I can *bounce* some of them back--like bullets.

These are moving a fair sight *faster* than a bullet, honey.

I know, darling. Odds are they'll go right through me. But that'll slow them too. And like you say...



...we have to try. Make me semitransparent so you don't miss Johnny's warnings.

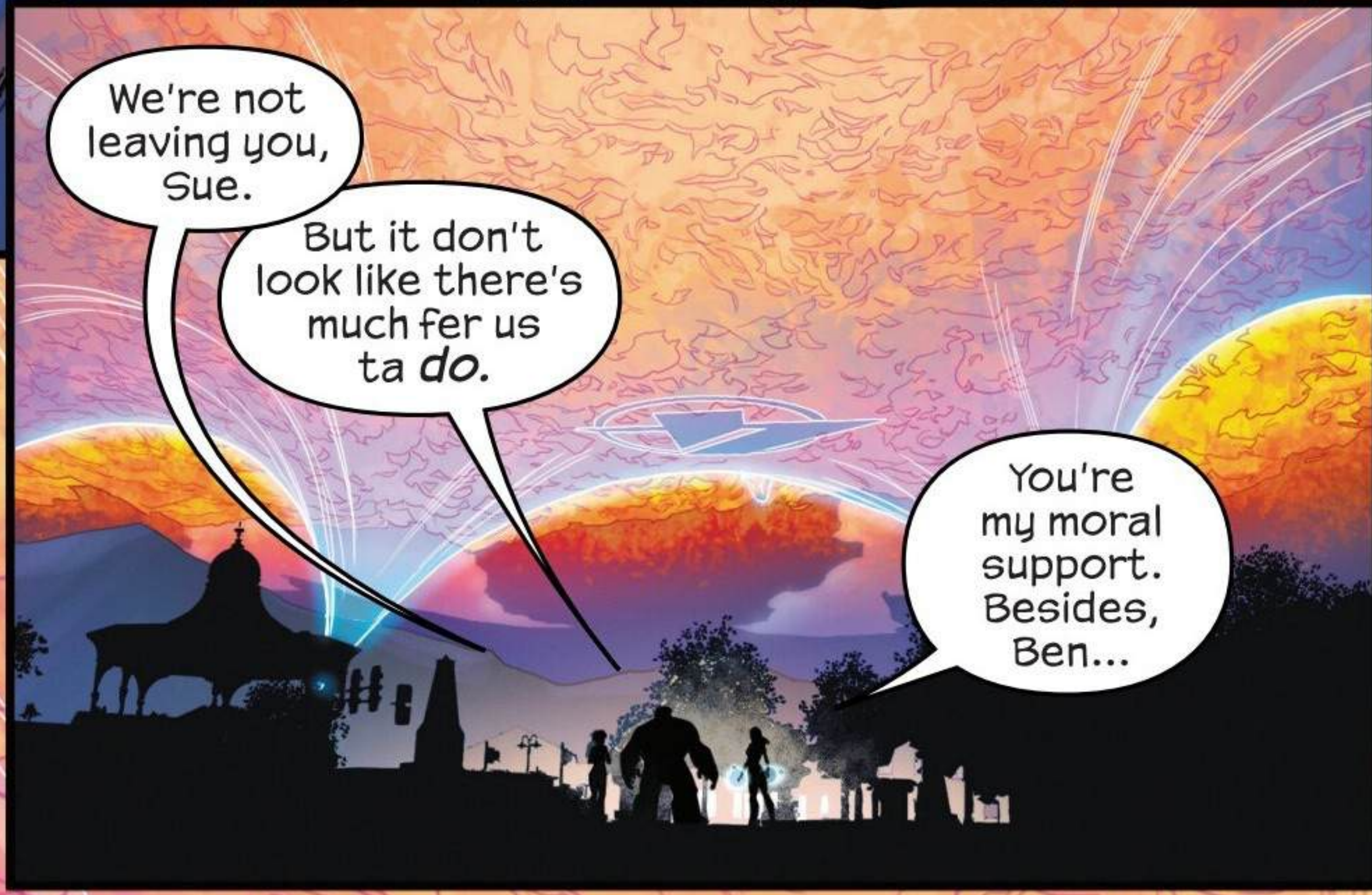
I love you, darling.

You've always been my greatest adventure.

As Dad leaves, Mom presses a response into his fingertips--
"That adventure's not over yet, mister."



It's beautiful.
Mushy, but beautiful.



We're not leaving you, Sue.

But it don't look like there's much fer us ta do.

You're my moral support. Besides, Ben...



...if any **do** get past me, I'm gonna need **someone** to hit 'em all back into space.

That won't work, and they all know it.



But they also know they have to try.

Krrk



Us against the universe again, huh, Sue?

Benjamin, my friend, I wouldn't have it any other way.

They have to try.



The first asteroid is small, and Dad's able to absorb and redirect its energy.

The second one isn't.

And behind it rides Armageddon.



Uncle Pete told me plenty of times that with great power there must also come great responsibility.

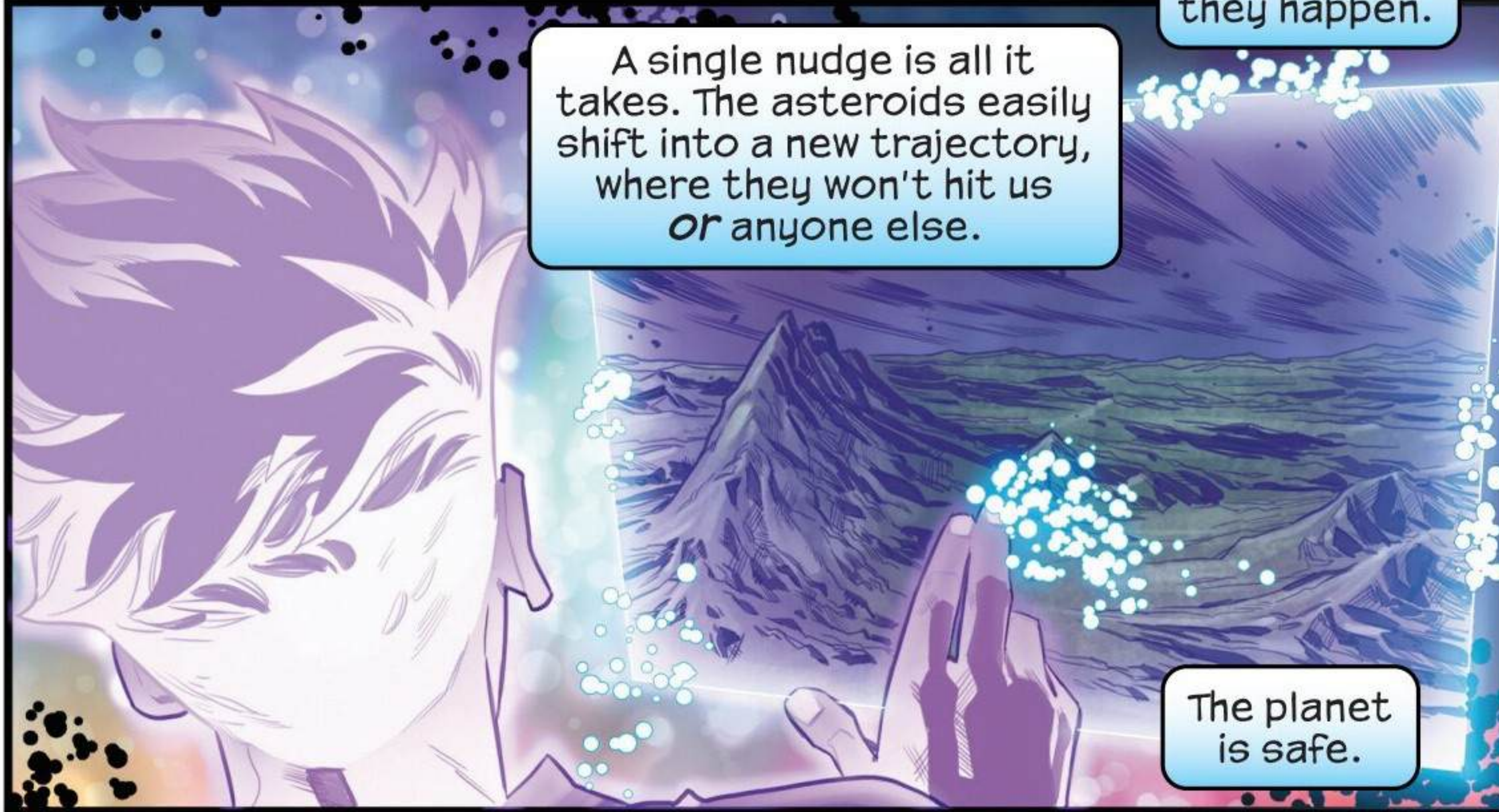
And he's right-- I can't *not* use my powers.



But I also know that if I *embrace* them too soon, they'll destroy me-- and everyone *else* too.

This is why I give myself nights like this. So I *can* foresee disasters...

...and *stop* them before they happen.



A single nudge is all it takes. The asteroids easily shift into a new trajectory, where they won't hit us *or* anyone else.

The planet is safe.



Every year, I ask myself if I should keep doing this.

Every year, I know the answer is still yes.



My mental block will restore as I sleep, and I won't remember anything. Until next year, when it all comes back to me...

...and I do it all again.

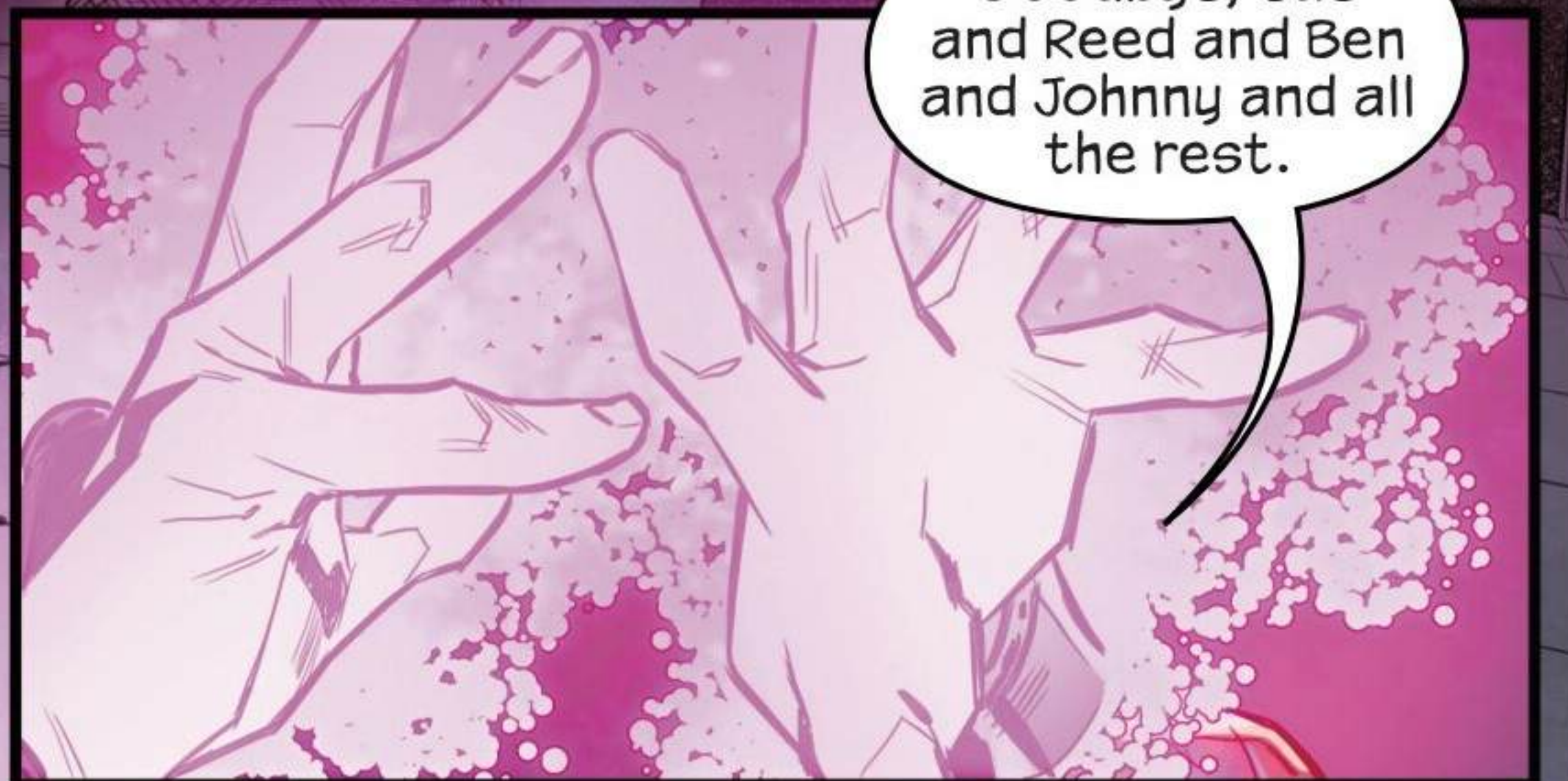


Well now, would you look at that? Someone has himself a secret.

All that power, Franklin, and you never noticed ol' Nick Scratch spying on you, in your room, in your *mind*.

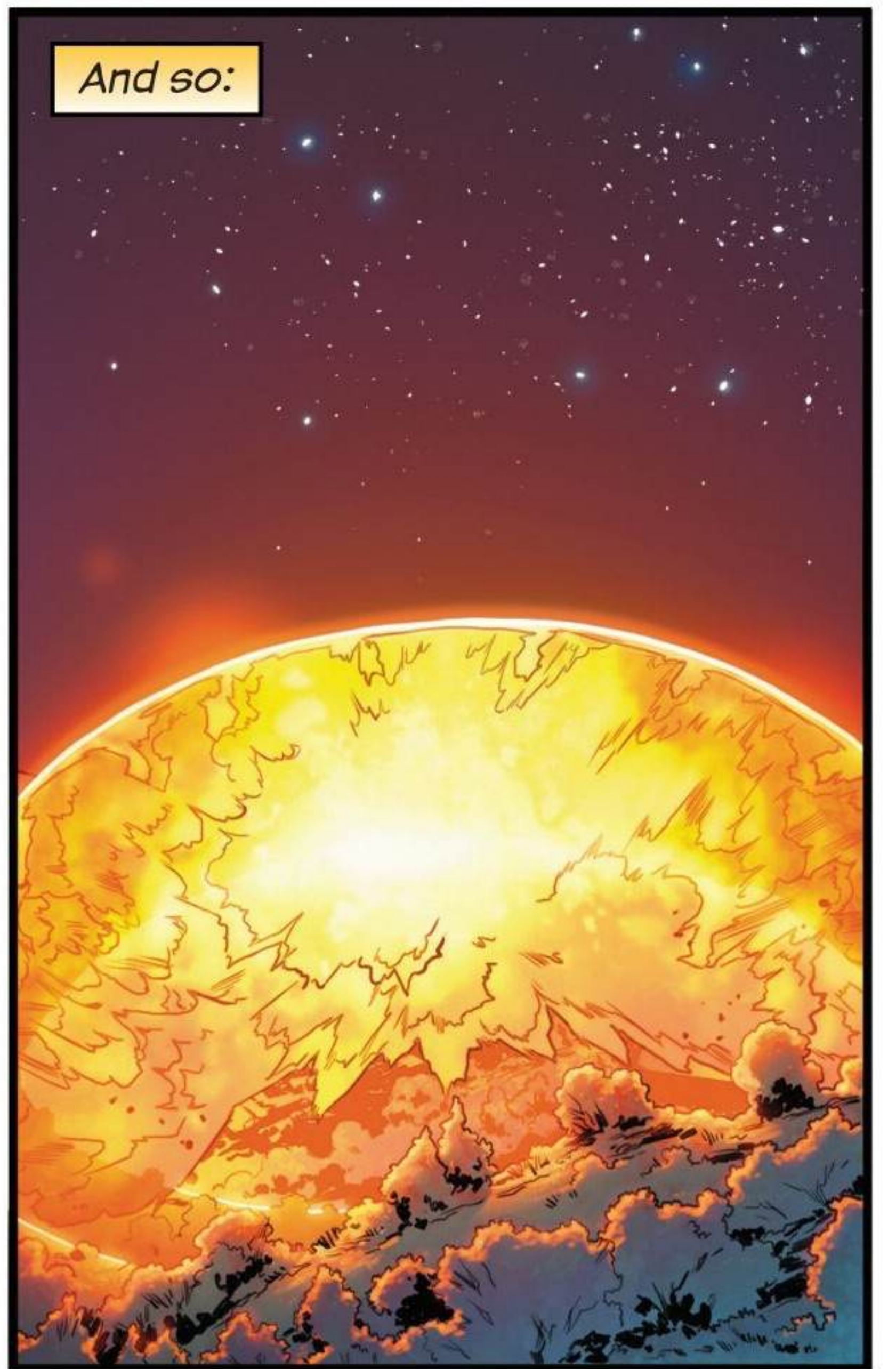
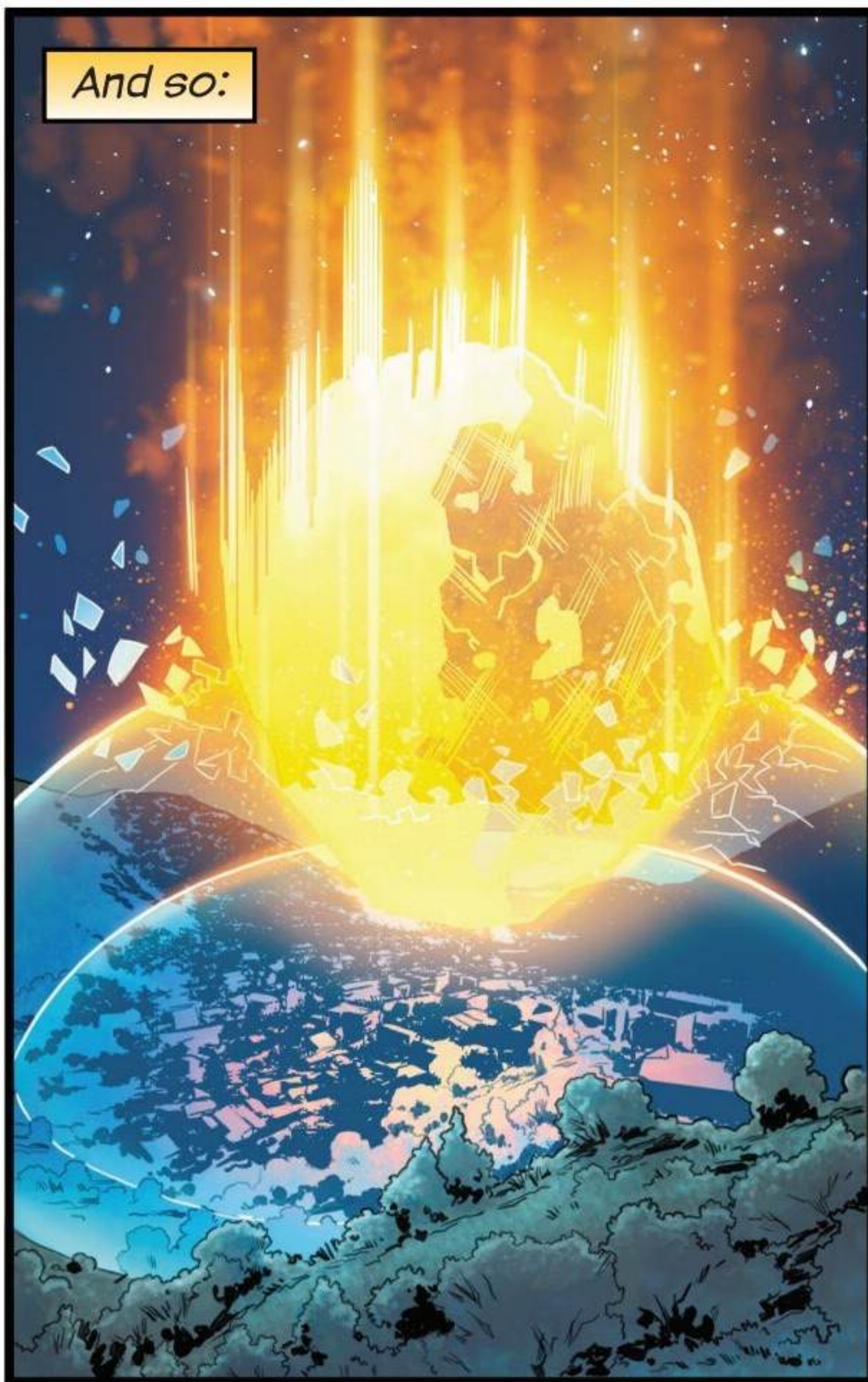
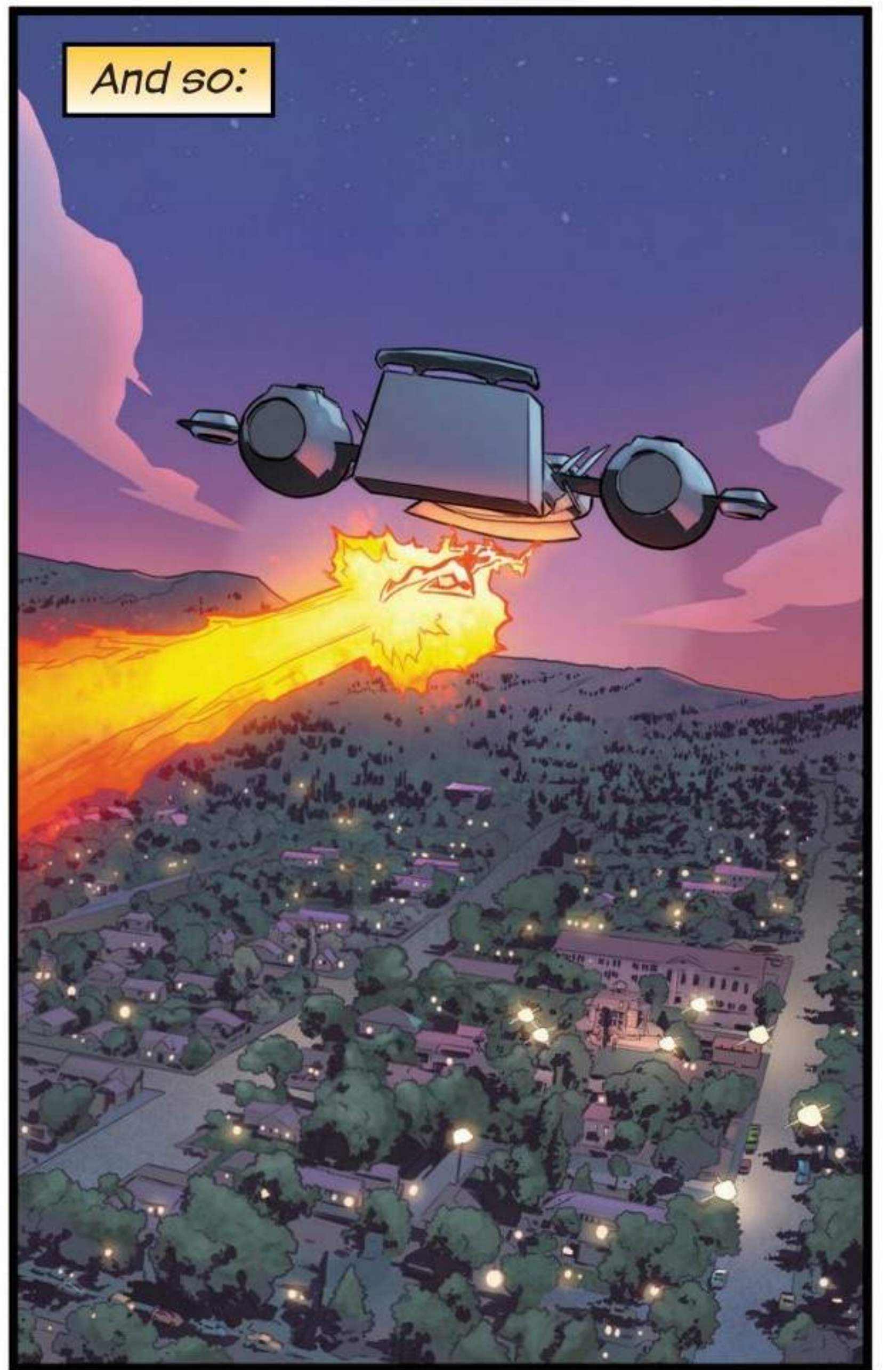
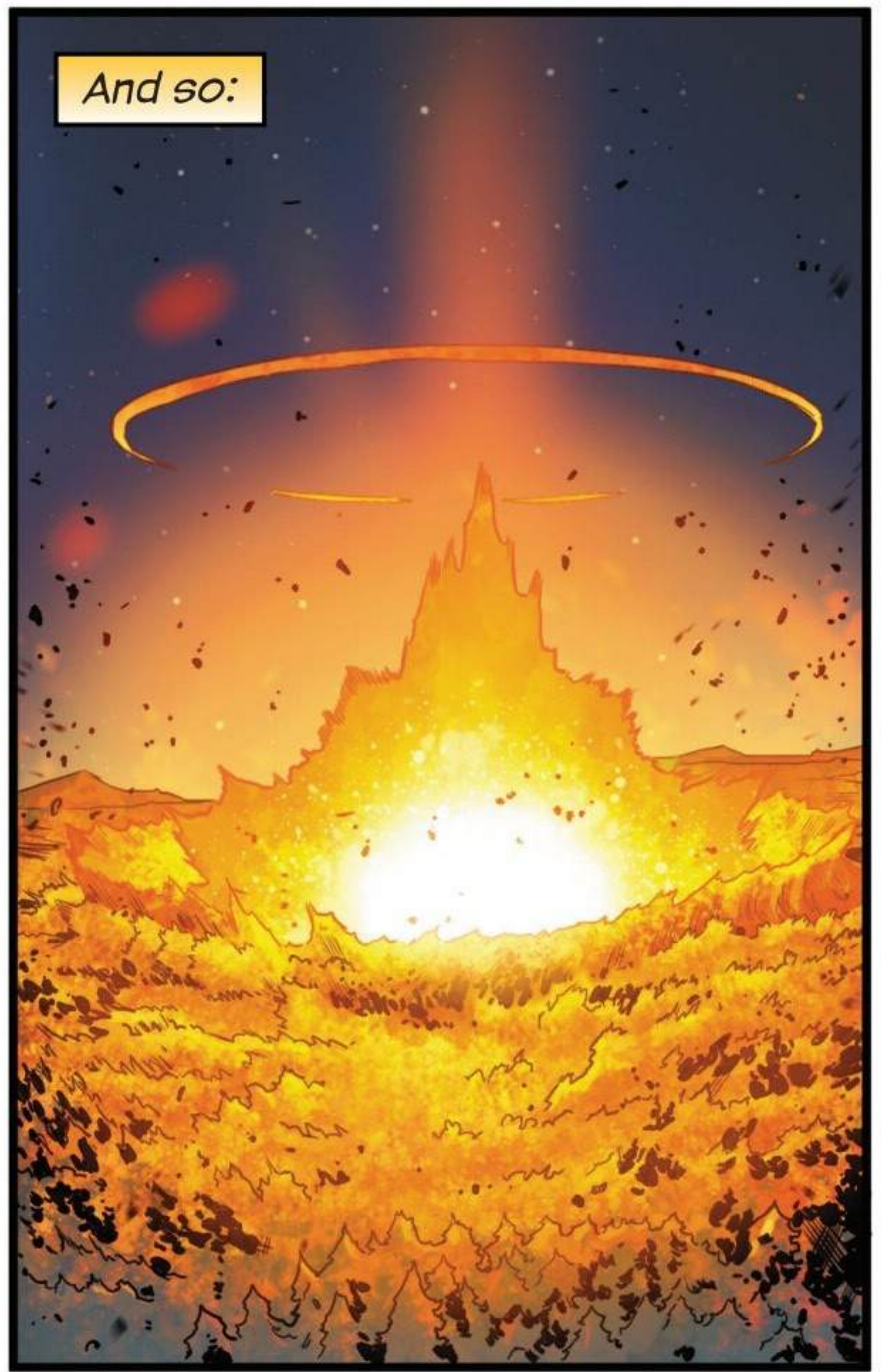
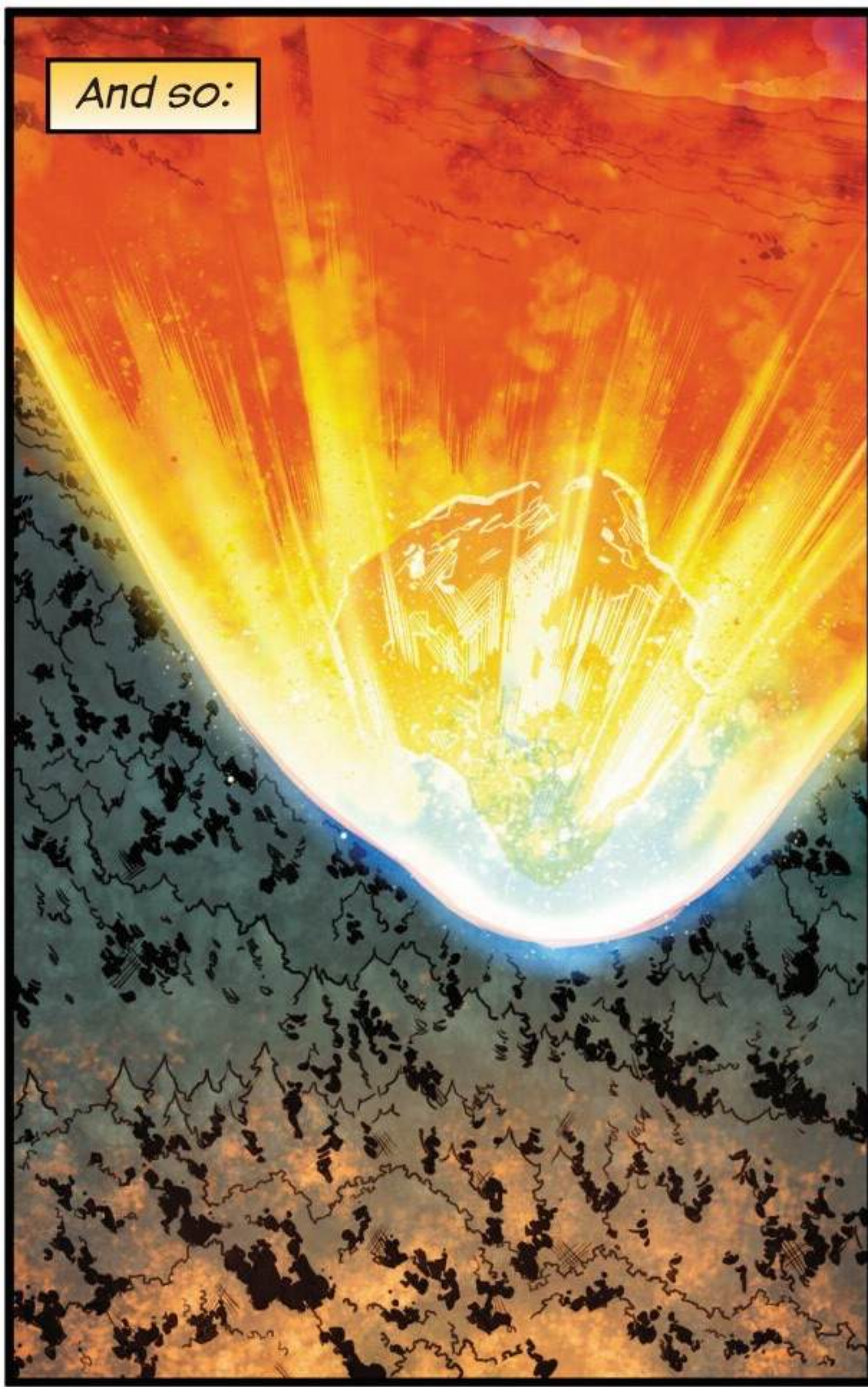
You're not the only one who can move asteroids as if by *magic*, child.

Goodbye, Sue and Reed and Ben and Johnny and all the rest.



And good riddance.







And so.

It seems to me we need two things: a way to see the asteroids coming, and a way to slow them down.

Now, anyone here suppose they might have some *powers* ta *help* wit' that?

Whatever's making them invisible, I can't cancel it out.



If I filled the stratosphere above us with fire, you'd see 'em moving *through* it, yeah? And I could enhance their fiery trails!

It's just a millisecond or so of warning, but...

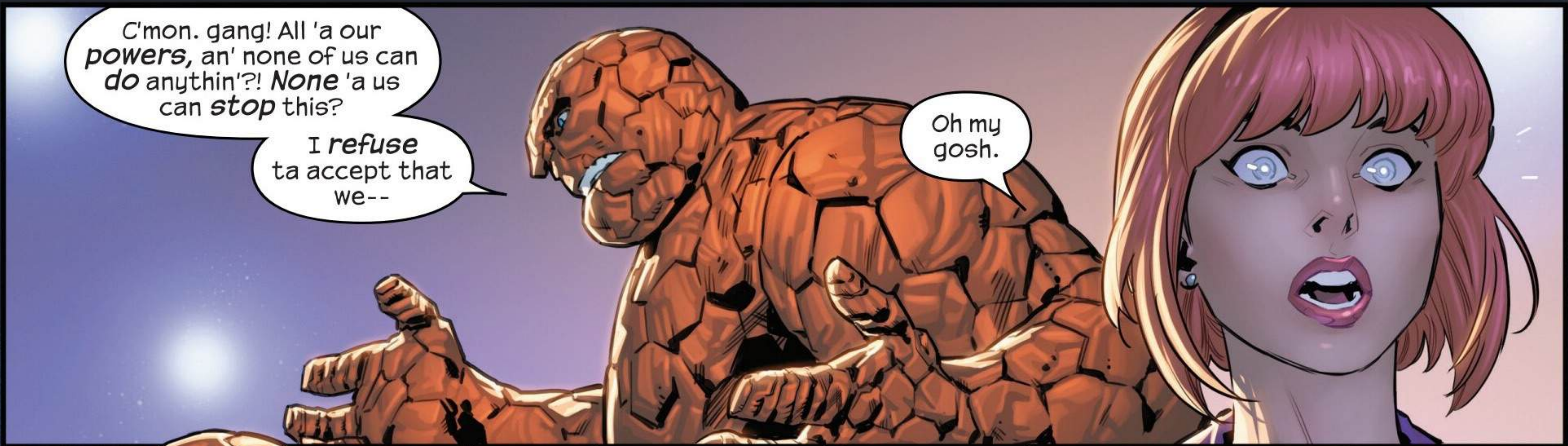


... But it won't make enough of a *difference*. I'm sorry, Johnny.



I could block them with my body, and--

--and get yourself killed moments before we die too. It's no good, Reed. I can't hold back another explosion like that.



C'mon. gang! All 'a our *powers*, an' none of us can *do* anythin'?! *None* 'a us can *stop* this?

I *refuse* ta accept that we--

Oh my gosh.



If none of you can stop an asteroid storm....

...what if *all* of you could?

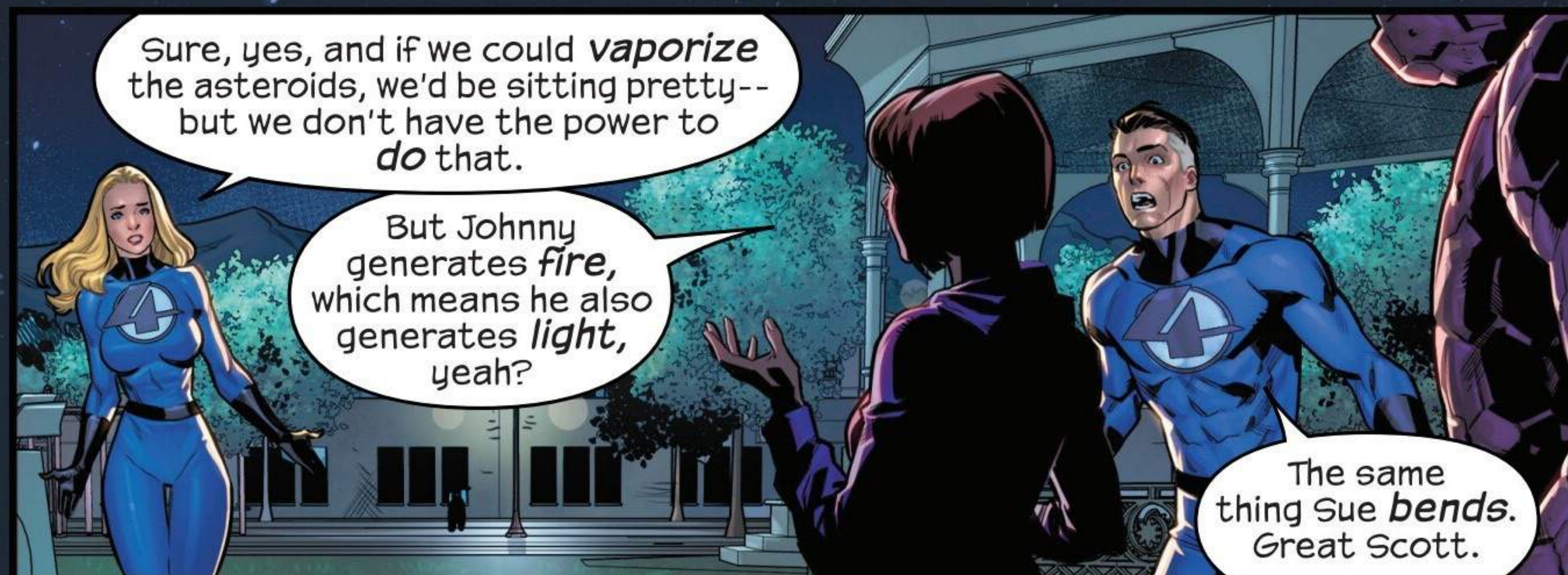


What are you thinking, Alicia?

Look, I'm not the science guy on the team, yeah?

But there was this retro game when I was a kid where you saved cities from atomic bombs by **blasting** them out of the sky...

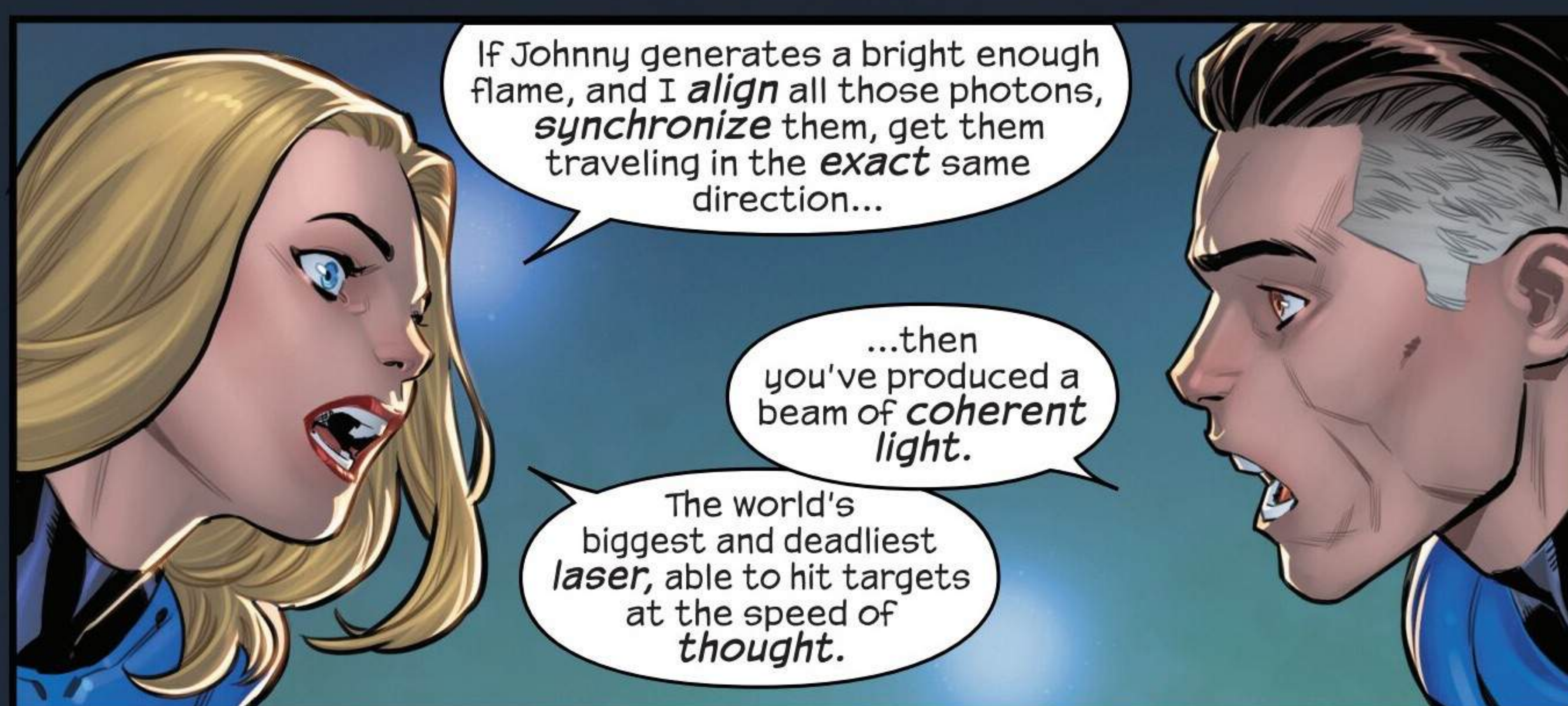
Missile Command, 1980. 103 million Twin Galaxies high score achieved in 2015.



Sure, yes, and if we could **vaporize** the asteroids, we'd be sitting pretty-- but we don't have the power to **do** that.

But Johnny generates **fire**, which means he also generates **light**, yeah?

The same thing Sue **bends**. Great Scott.



If Johnny generates a bright enough flame, and I **align** all those photons, **synchronize** them, get them traveling in the **exact** same direction...

...then you've produced a beam of **coherent light**.

The world's biggest and deadliest **laser**, able to hit targets at the speed of **thought**.



Right! We could vaporize the asteroids just by **looking** at them! Yes!

Not me-- I'll need to focus on creating and maintaining the **beam**.

But if ya had force-field rollers on our eyes or somethin', you could use **that** fer targeting!



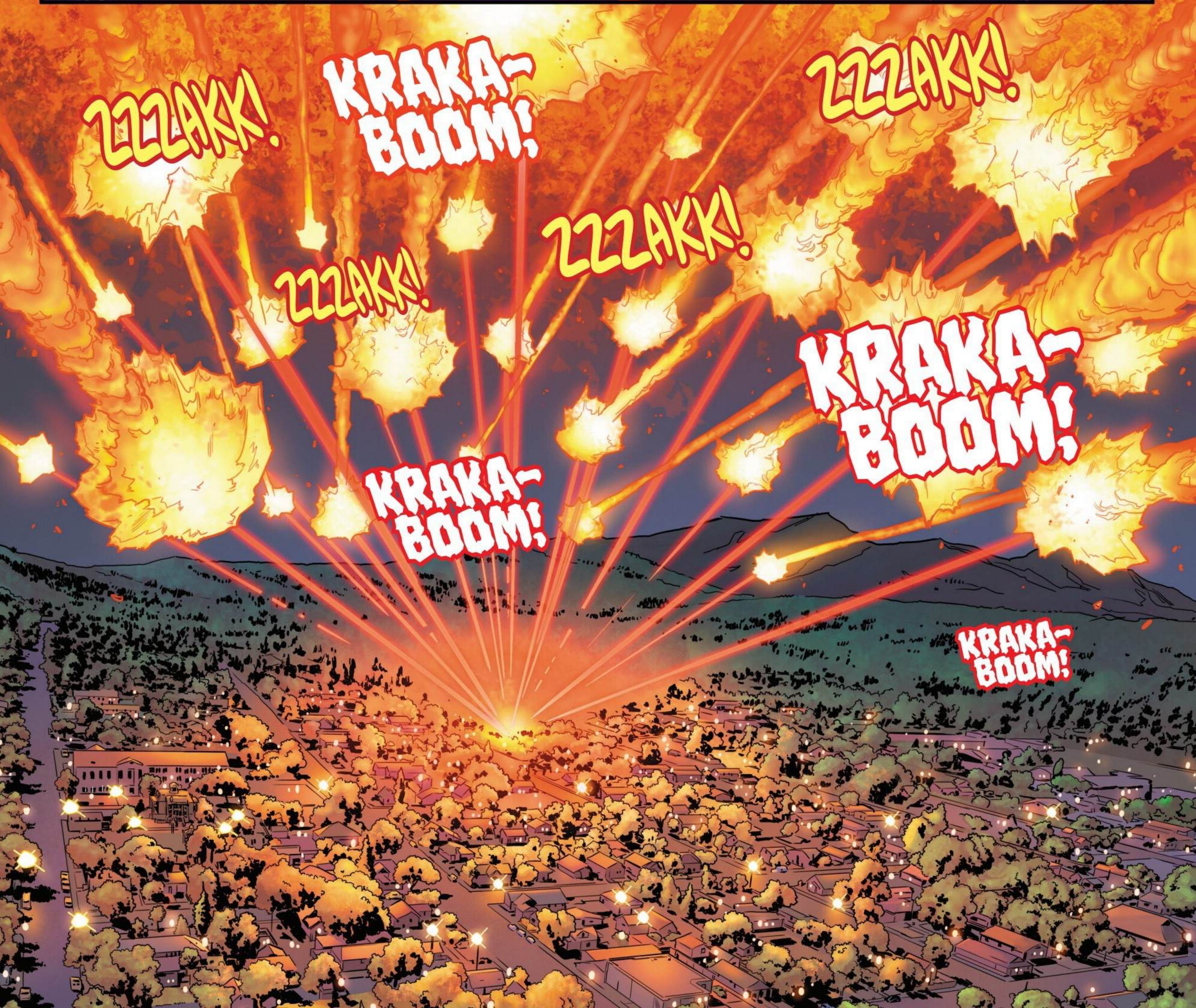
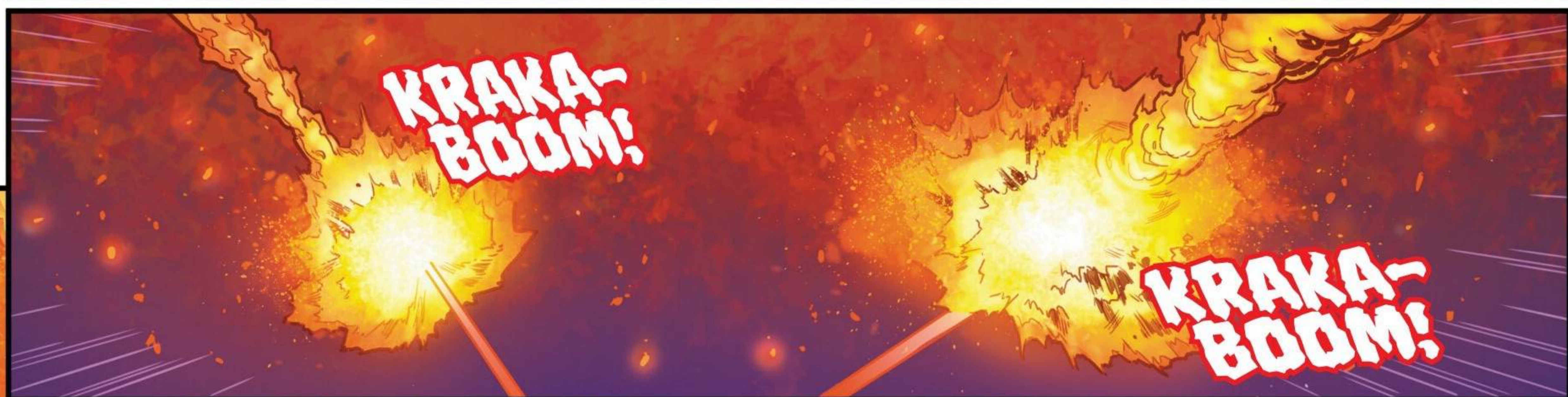
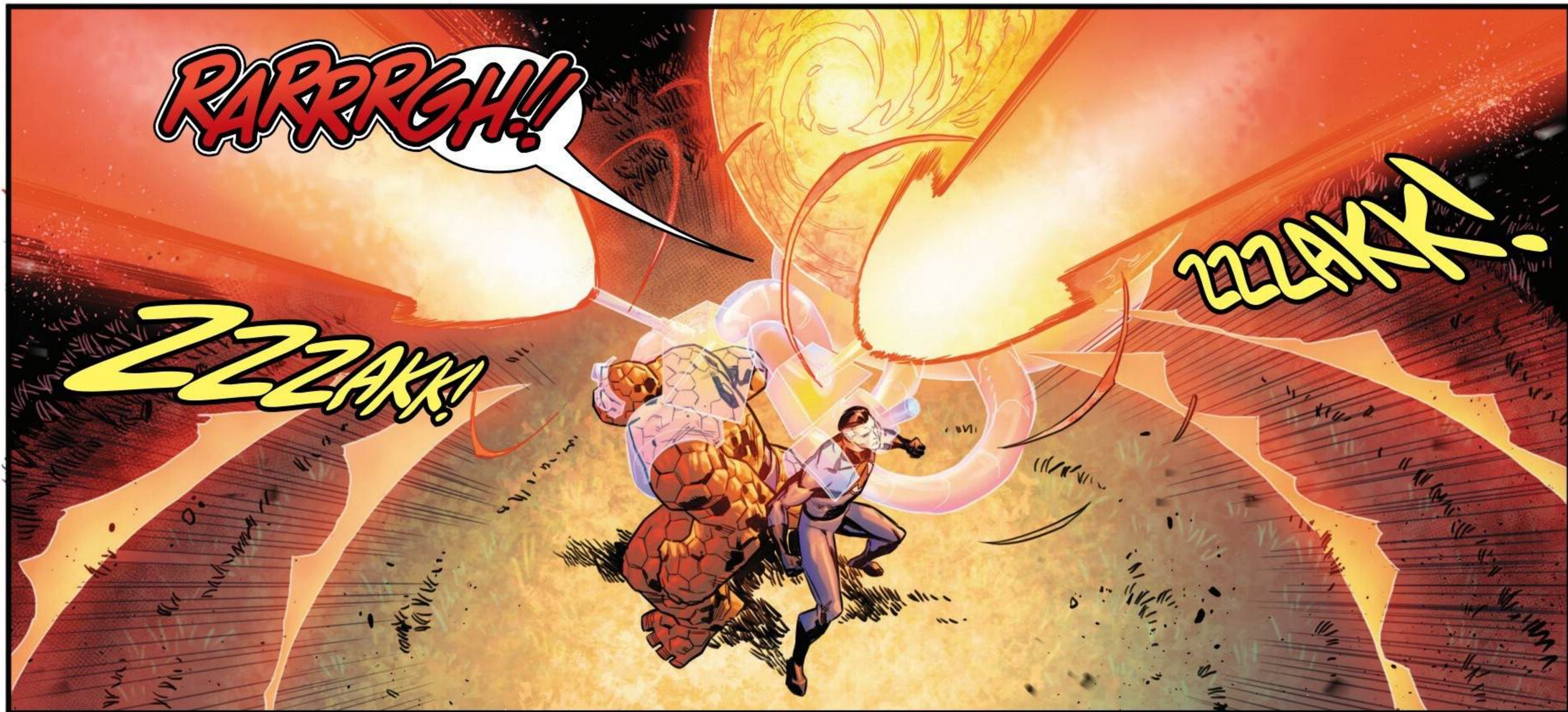
Ben, Reed--in a few moments, anything you even **glance** at is going to cease to exist, so keep your eyes on the prize.

Johnny, have Flame-O give us that fire after all, then focus **everything** else you've got into the combustion chamber I'm building around your right hand.



I need the absolute **brightest** fire you can muster.

Flame on, buddy.



The next morning.

And that's what we got up to last night, kids. Savin' the world from invisible asteroids, no big deal!

Mother, I have repeatedly asked to be woken up for *any* apocalyptic events, and yet, *again*, you let me sleep through it.

Unbelievable.

I don't get it though. How'd you think of it, the laser-move thing?

Alicia had the initial idea.

Please. We built on it together.

But that's the thing! Far as I know, you've *never* used your powers like that before. I woulda never guessed it!

That's the joy of the universe, Franklin: It's not fully predictable. Just because something hasn't happened before doesn't mean it never *will*.

You never really know what you can and can't do, kiddo. And that's a good thing, because it means there's always room for *surprises*.

No matter how bad things get, there's always room for *hope*.

Huh. I actually really like that. Thanks, Mom.

Plus, now me n' your mom can fire laser beams whenever we want.

Will you be contacting Cyclops of the X-Men to gloat?

Oh snap!
Sue! We should
totally call Cyclops
to gloat!

Johnny...

Ooh, and let's get
*Ice*man on the horn
while we're at it! Hahahah!
Imagine *Bobby* trying to
make a *laser* out of his
stupid ice powers!!

**S.H.I.E.L.D.
HEADQUARTERS.
LOCATION:
CLASSIFIED.**

So, the good
news, Ms. Hill, is
that a large part of
Earth *didn't* end in
a firestorm last
night.

Always a plus,
Mr. Pusce.

And the better
news is, while Susan
and Jonathan Storm *did*
combine their powers
in a new way--

--it was one
that, this time, we'd
already *speculated*
was possible.

The return of the Baxter
Building went well too. Excellent.
There were concerns they'd--
well, never mind.

And as long as
the Fantastic Four keep
producing *abilities* we've
foreseen, we'll know what
assets we have in our
corner...

J.STORM ULTRAVIOLET INCENDIARIES// CLASSIFIED

STORM/GRIMM HOLOGRAPHIC PHOTOLITHOGRAPHY // CLASSIFIED

RICHARDS MITOSIS INVESTIGATION // CLASSIFIED

STORM SIBLINGS LASER/MASER POTENTIAL // CLASSIFIED

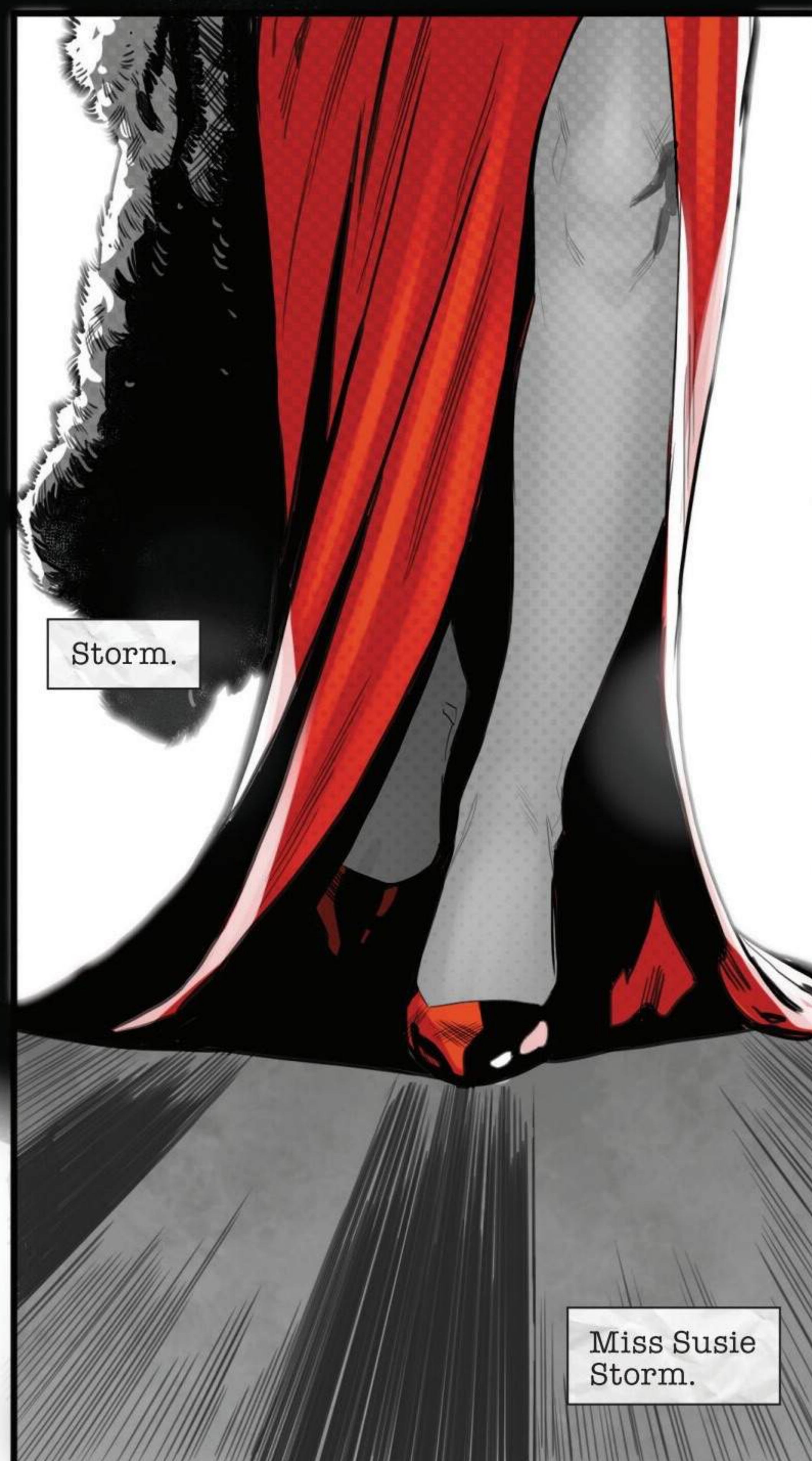
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...and how
to handle them
if they ever go
rogue.



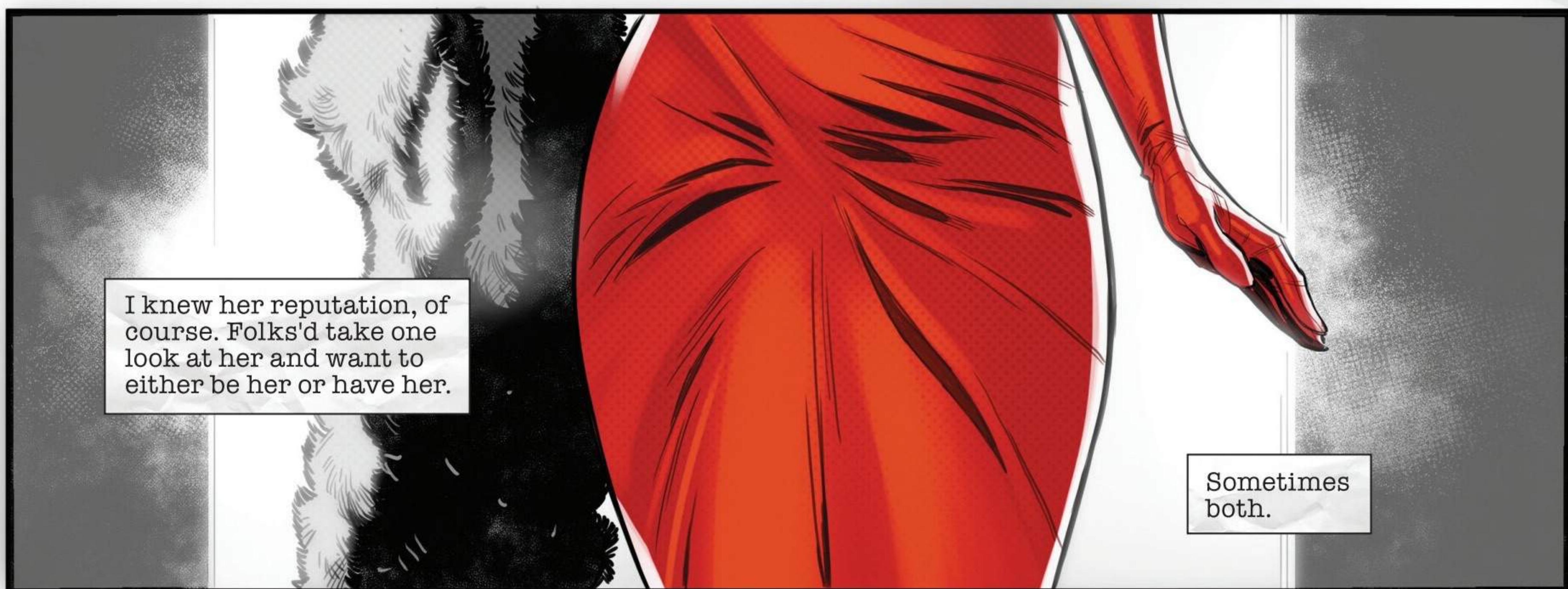
She came in trouble,
all five feet six
inches of it.

Even her name was a
warning that things
were about to go real
bad for me, real quick.



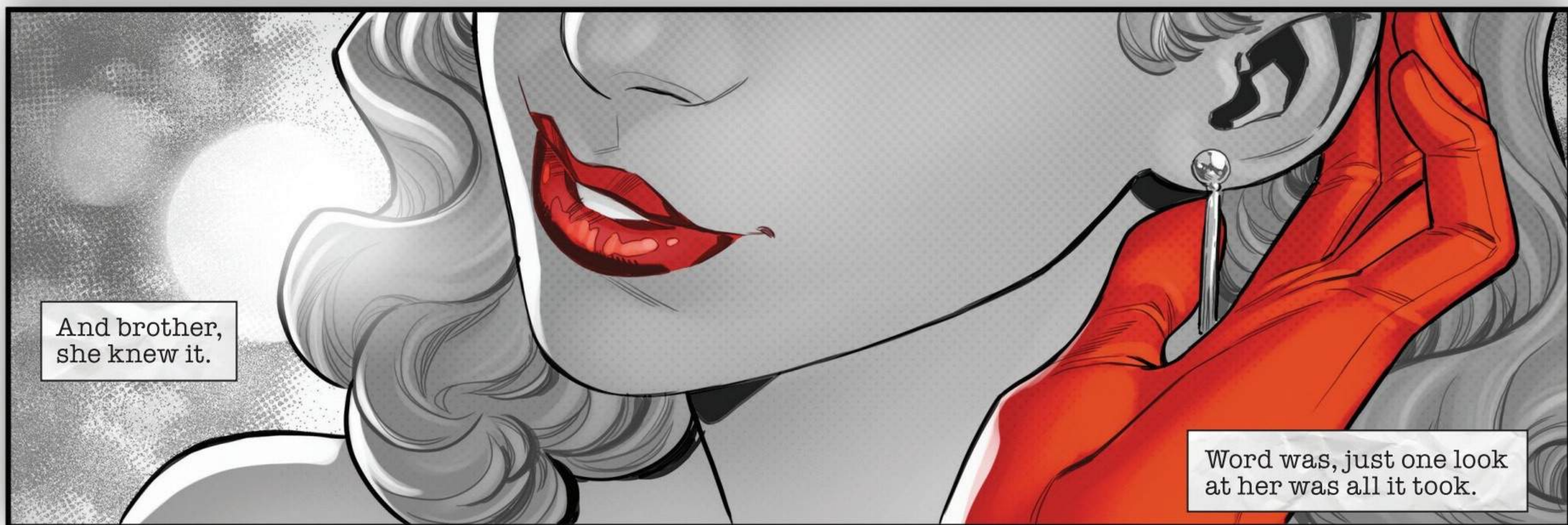
Storm.

Miss Susie
Storm.



I knew her reputation, of
course. Folks'd take one
look at her and want to
either be her or have her.

Sometimes
both.



And brother,
she knew it.

Word was, just one look
at her was all it took.

Too bad for her
that I'm blind.

MASTERS
INVESTIGATIONS

Miss
Masters,
please...

...I
need your
help.

DETECTIVE
ALICIA MASTERS IN:

"THE PERFECT STORM"



It's my boyfriend, Reed. Reed Richards.

The egghead down at E.S.U.

The handsome, brilliant, accomplished professor, yes. He's *missing*.

I'd heard of him: the lucky sap with a plum tomato way out of his league. Word was, the Prof's the first to even stand a chance of getting Susie to settle down.

It didn't seem likely he'd pull a vanishing act.

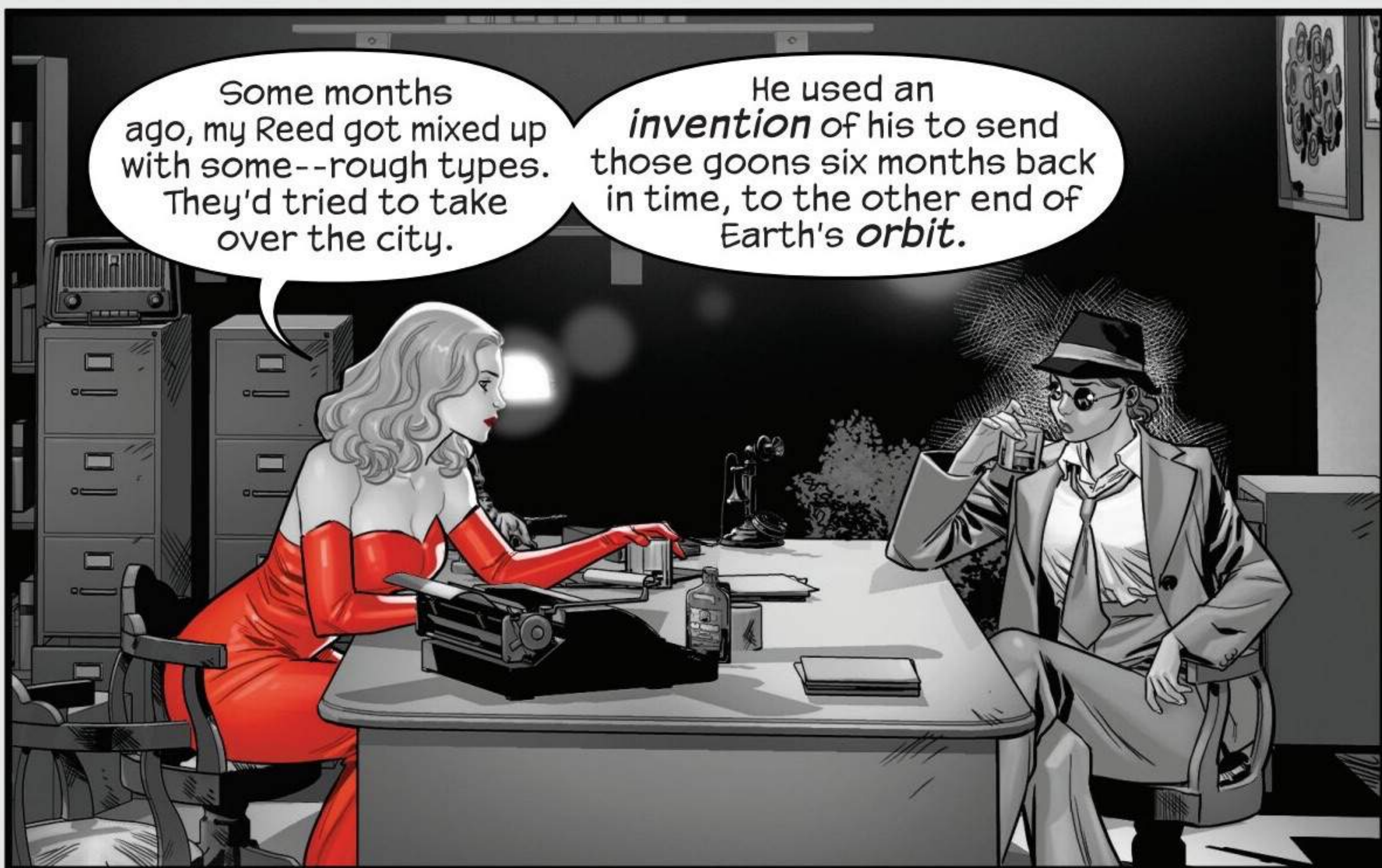
Suppose you tell me when you saw him last, Miss Storm.



Saturday night, our standing dinner date at La Bella. He was-- upset. Told me he'd been visited by *G-men* that morning.

What'd they want?

Why, Miss Masters, they wanted a weapon.



Some months ago, my Reed got mixed up with some--rough types. They'd tried to take over the city.

He used an *invention* of his to send those goons six months back in time, to the other end of Earth's *orbit*.



You're pulling my leg.

Reed's an *inventor*, Miss Masters. A singular mind. I swear, I could write a *thesis* just on what he mumbles in his *sleep*.

One shot was all it took. He saved us all, then and there.





But some bird-watchers from Uncle S.H.I.E.L.D. must've eventually gotten wind, because they showed up wanting to know *why* he'd invented a way to kill people with *time itself*.

And to hear Reed tell it, they weren't the types to take "no" for an *answer*.



So he gives 'em his fancy ray gun.

No, Miss Masters: He destroyed it long ago. Reed's a man of *science*, not an *arms manufacturer*.

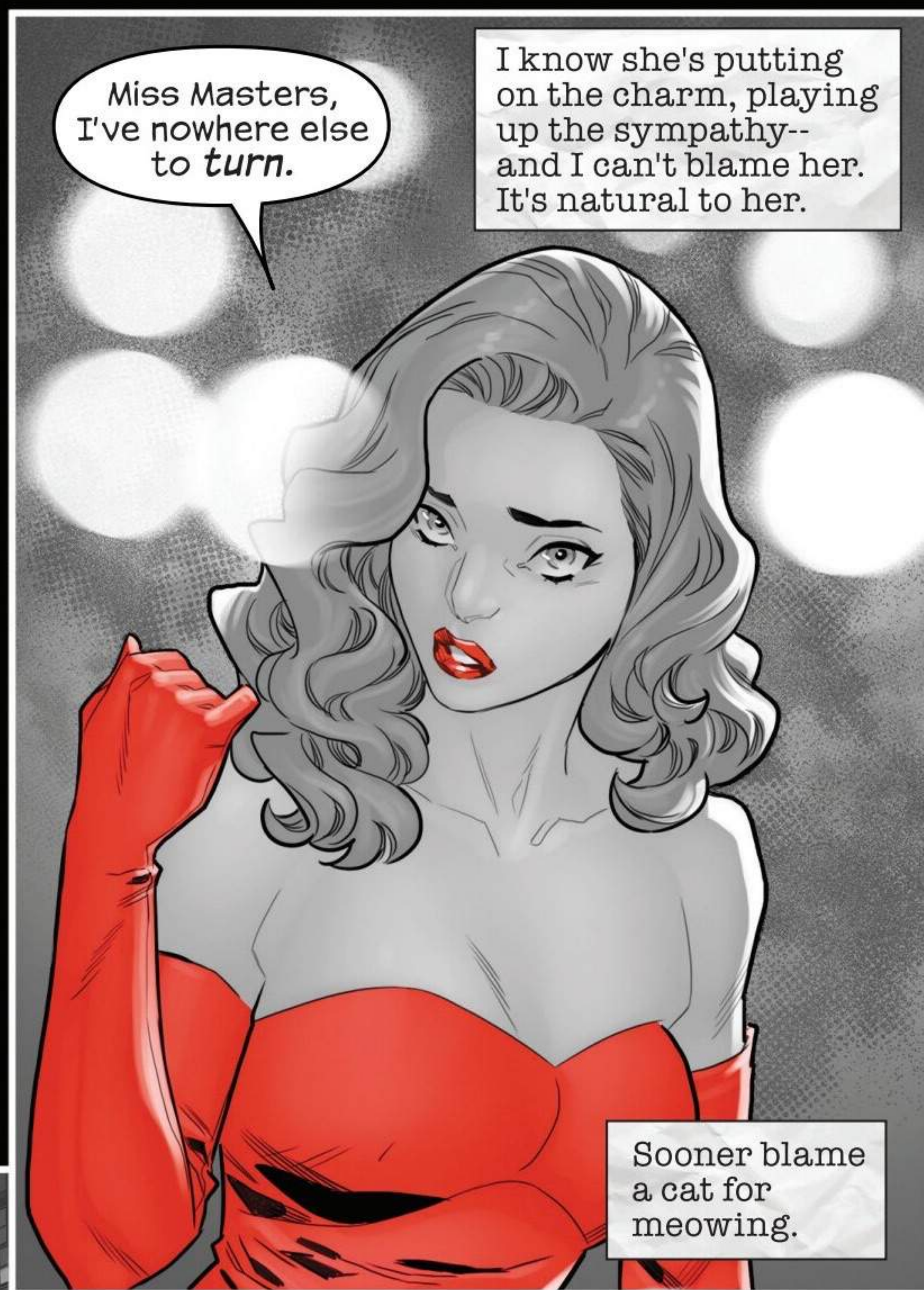
He told them no, and then they *left*.



And then today, he wasn't picking up his calls, and when I went by his office...

I'm *worried*, Miss Masters. I've disappeared before, for some very fun weeks at a time. But Reed's not like that.

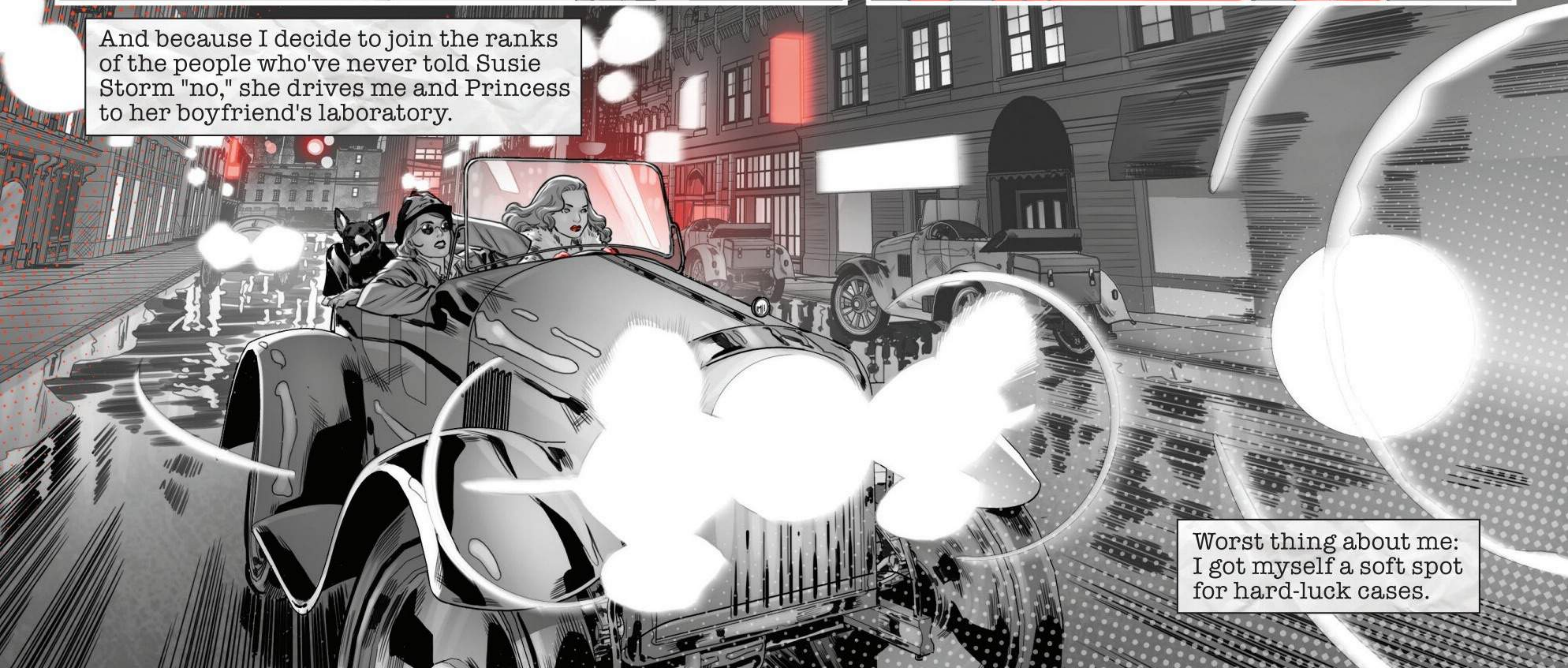
I know I can't pay your usual fee on an *archaeologist's* salary, but... could you find it in your heart to *help* me anyway?



Miss Masters, I've nowhere else to *turn*.

I know she's putting on the charm, playing up the sympathy--and I can't blame her. It's natural to her.

Sooner blame a cat for meowing.



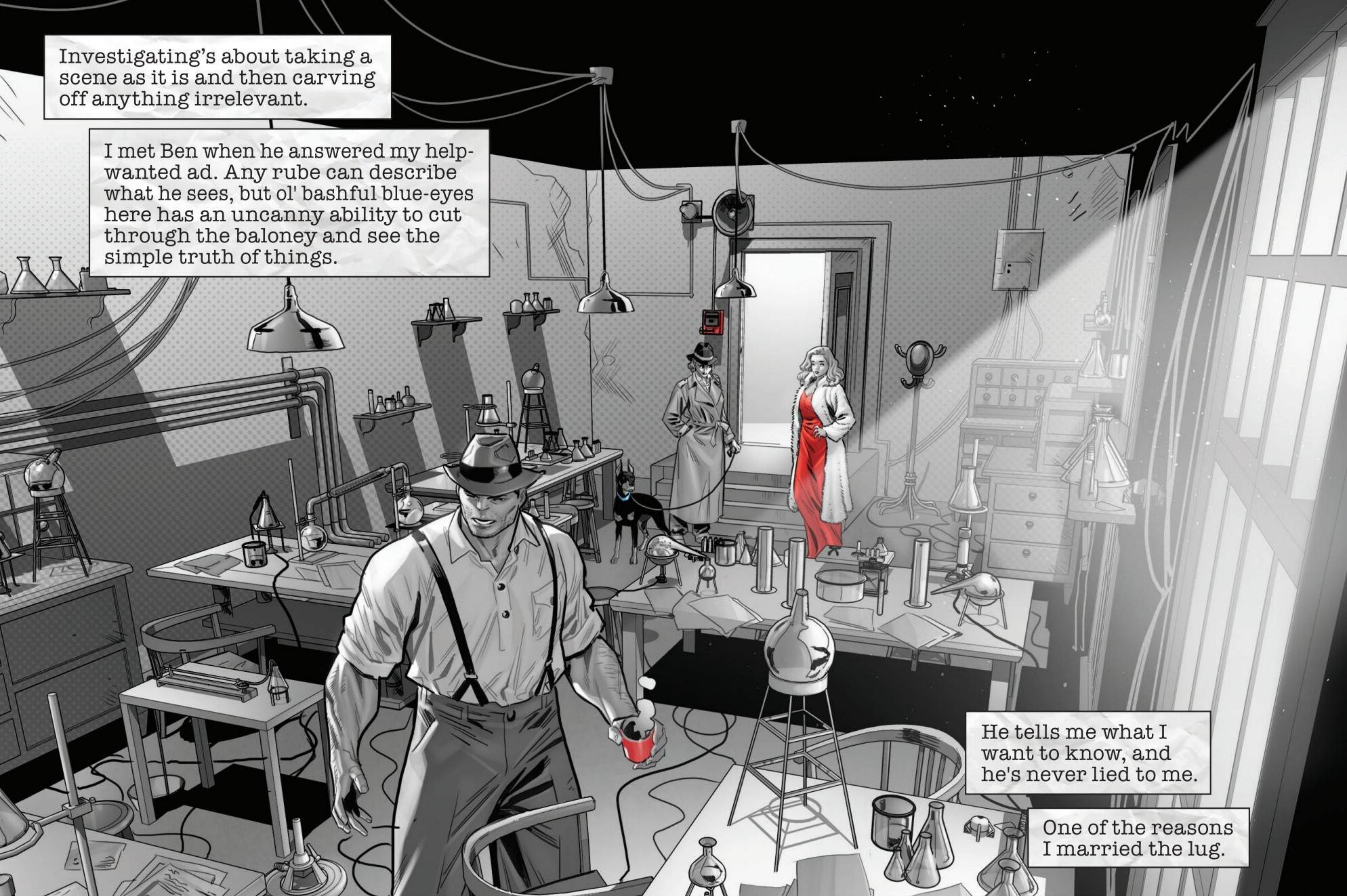
And because I decide to join the ranks of the people who've never told Susie Storm "no," she drives me and Princess to her boyfriend's laboratory.

Worst thing about me: I got myself a soft spot for hard-luck cases.



Investigating's about taking a scene as it is and then carving off anything irrelevant.

I met Ben when he answered my help-wanted ad. Any rube can describe what he sees, but ol' bashful blue-eyes here has an uncanny ability to cut through the baloney and see the simple truth of things.



He tells me what I want to know, and he's never lied to me.

One of the reasons I married the lug.

We got ourselves a life that's not too bad in a part of town that is. Adopted two great kids, too, Jo and Nicki.

Even if we're always broke, I wouldn't change it for the world.

But as Ben finishes describing the scene, I realize there's not a single clue here as to where the Prof went or why.

Miss Storm, does anything look either out of place or missing here to you?

No, it all looks like it always does.

Which means either your squeeze left of his own accord... or whoever took him knew what they were doing.



Don't worry. I've leads to follow up elsewhere, Miss Storm.

But where?

Where else?

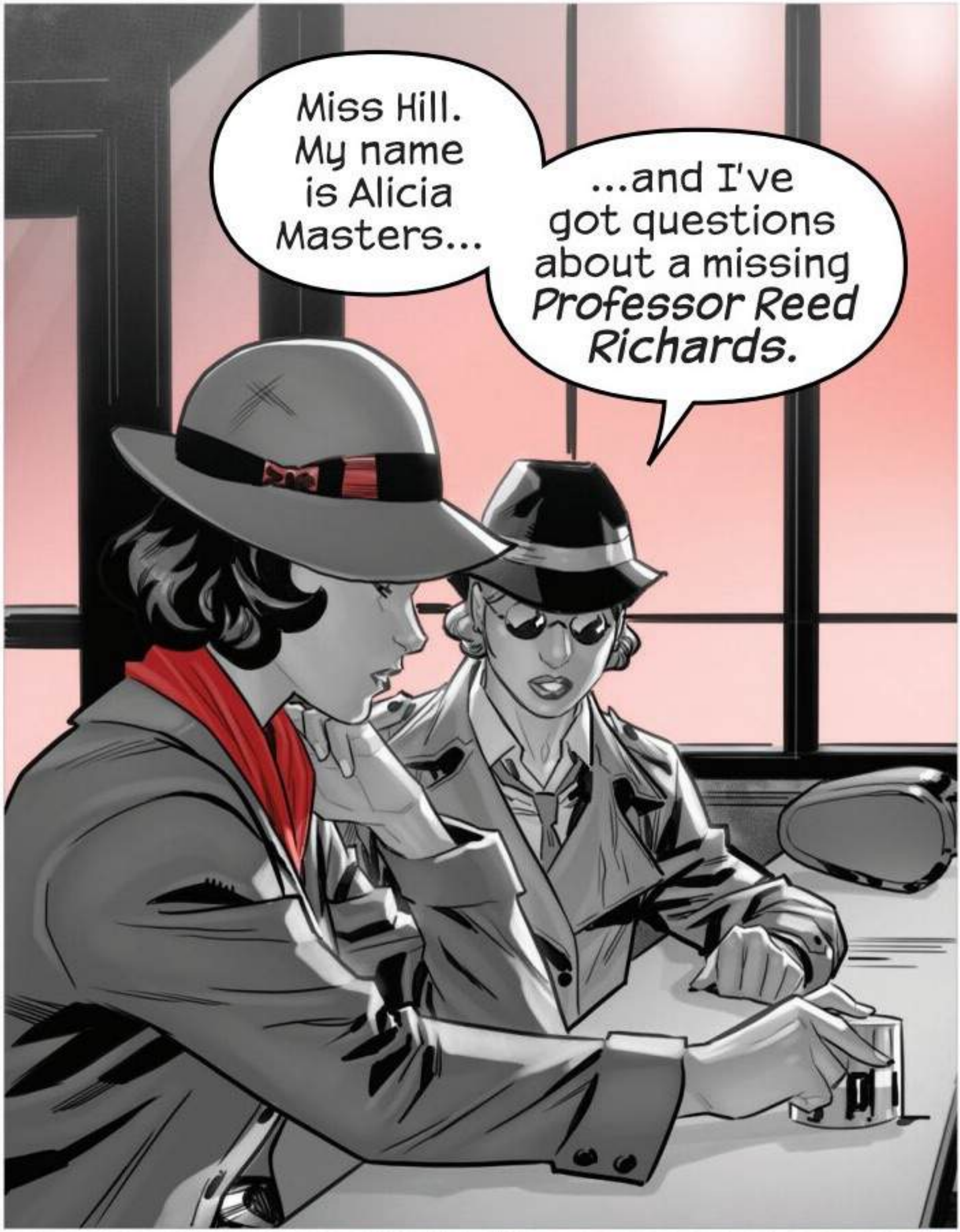


S.H.I.E.L.D. HQ.
The unofficial one.

A gin mill down the
street from the real deal--
with the advantage that
a gal like me can just
waltz right into it.

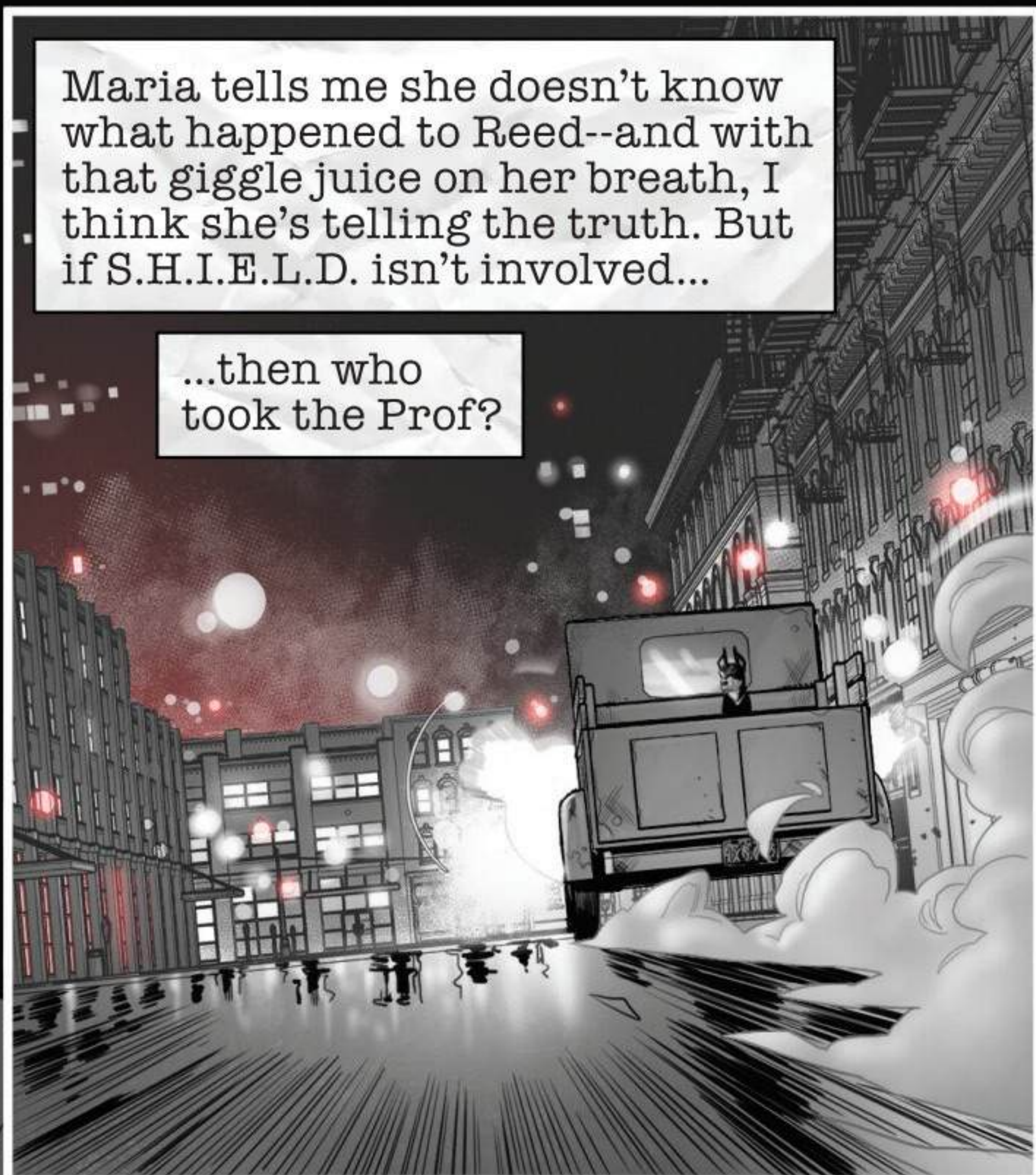
I see
her at th' bar.
I'll get ya a
seat.

THE BLUE MOON SALOON



Maria tells me she doesn't know what happened to Reed--and with that giggle juice on her breath, I think she's telling the truth. But if S.H.I.E.L.D. isn't involved...

...then who took the Prof?



Susie's clean. But she's got her a brother--a grease monkey, a real hothead type, the kind of guy who loves running his mouth almost as much as he loves working on engines. And he's broke.

BAXTER
APARTMENTS



Suppose he took offense to something Reed said? The Prof has a reputation for being blunt. Could Johnny Storm have flown off the handle, killed Reed?

I find the kid squatting in this condemned building--he's the only one in the place.

Says he doesn't like it when I tell him the way my thoughts have been going recently.

Says he'd never do anything to hurt his sister.

Says he'd greatly prefer it if we left.

So after he kicks us out and slams the door in our faces, Ben stomps his way down grimy stairs, making sure his grumbling's loud enough to wake the dead...

...while I hold back, silent...



...and press my ear to his door.

It's me. Someone was here.

Some detective, how should I know? Point is, if she's coming to my place--

--it means she's getting close to *you*.





It's late and the sitter needs to go home, so I have Ben drop me off at "King" McKenzie's. He's a friend of mine...as much as a man like King has friends.

Ol' King's one of the few non-crooked cops on the force. That doesn't make him popular. And the fact he's arrogant as all hell doesn't help.

Please, it's just a single call. Johnny Storm dropped a dime, and I know you keep logs.

That imperiousness is what earned him the moniker--and a one-way trip down here to the city's backwaters.

You act as if you can simply walk in and make demands of me, Miss Masters.

I'd owe you one.

You'd owe me a thousand, and I don't see how you'd ever be able to *repay* me.



C'mon, throw me a bone for old time's sake, will you, King? I'm behind the eight ball on the Richards case, and I--

Richards? *Reed* Richards?

Next time, I suggest you *tell* me who you're working for--save both of us some *time*.

If it's for *Susie*, I ought to be able to find something...

I never needed vision to see how sweet poor King is on her.



Call went to that nightclub on 5th: "Deviant's Realm."

Harvey Elder's place. I know him.

Then you know he's a big fish--dangerous and crooked as a barrel of fishhooks. Be careful, Miss Masters.

Careful doesn't get you paid. But thanks, King.

And send my regards to Nita.

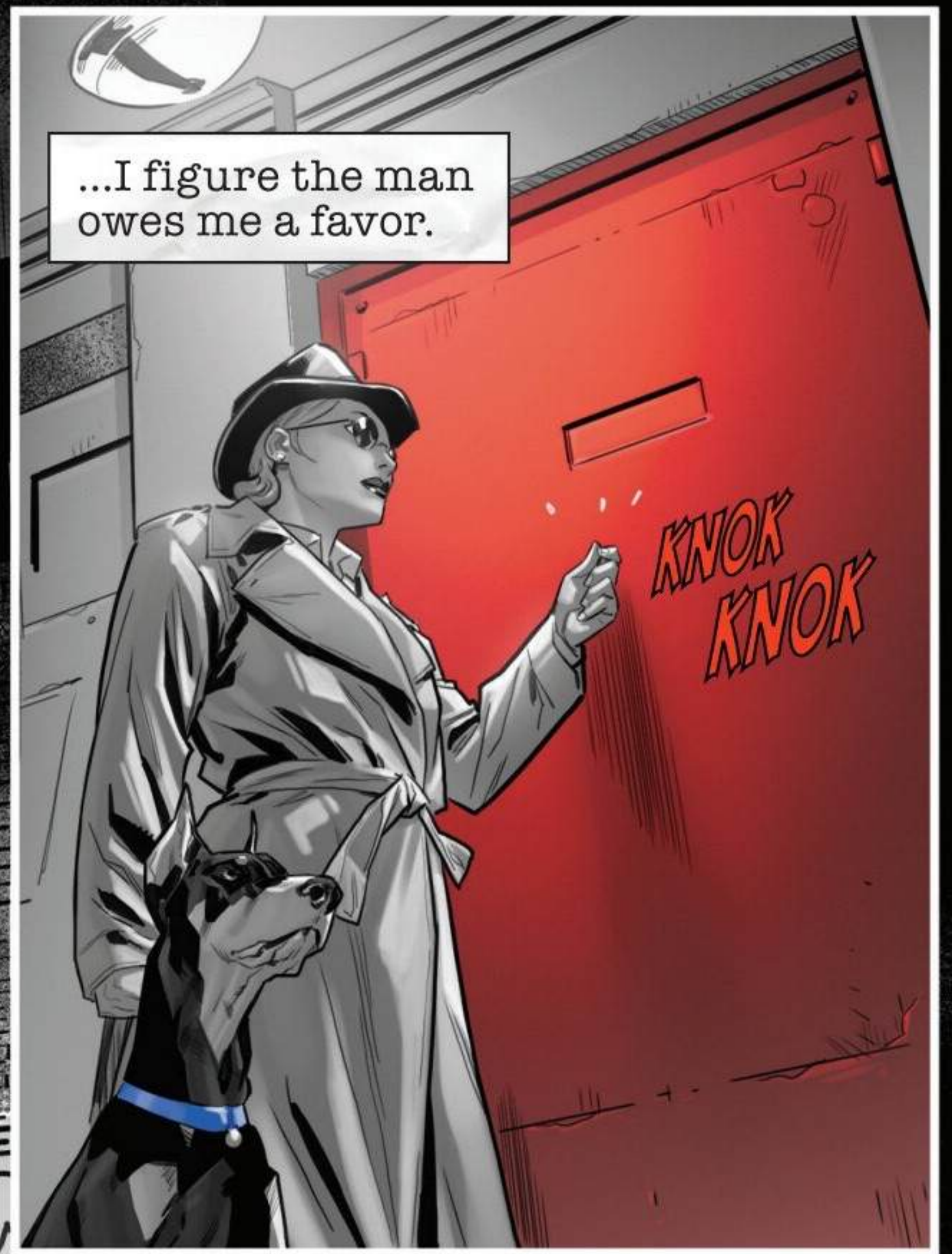
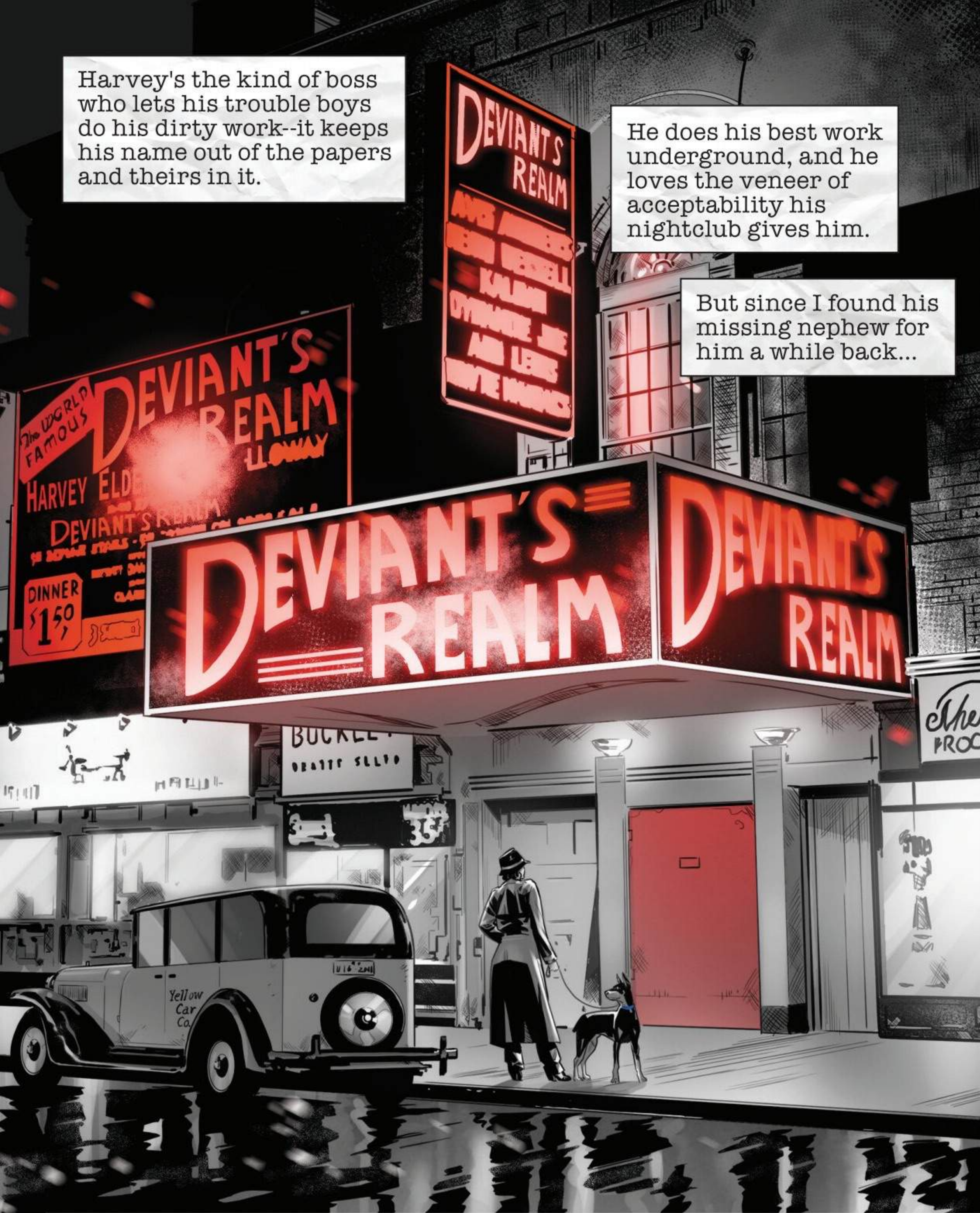


Harvey's the kind of boss who lets his trouble boys do his dirty work--it keeps his name out of the papers and theirs in it.

He does his best work underground, and he loves the veneer of acceptability his nightclub gives him.

But since I found his missing nephew for him a while back...

...I figure the man owes me a favor.



Alicia Masters for Harvey Elder.

He ain't--

Tell him. I think you'll find that he *is*.

His men lead me into his office--none too carefully.

I like yah, kitten, so I'll tell ya th' *truth*. I got nothin' to do with no *professors*. And as for the kid--

--well, fact is, he got in deep with some of my boys a while back, but he paid that off *weeks* ago.



And even if he *hadn't*, kidnappin' the man's brother-in-law-ta-be ain't good business. Kid's broke. For cryin' out loud, Alicia, he lives alone in some apartment building even *bums* don't consider fit fer habitation.

The smart money's on kidnappin' *him* and making the *Prof* pay ta get him back. At least Reed's got the *mazuma*.

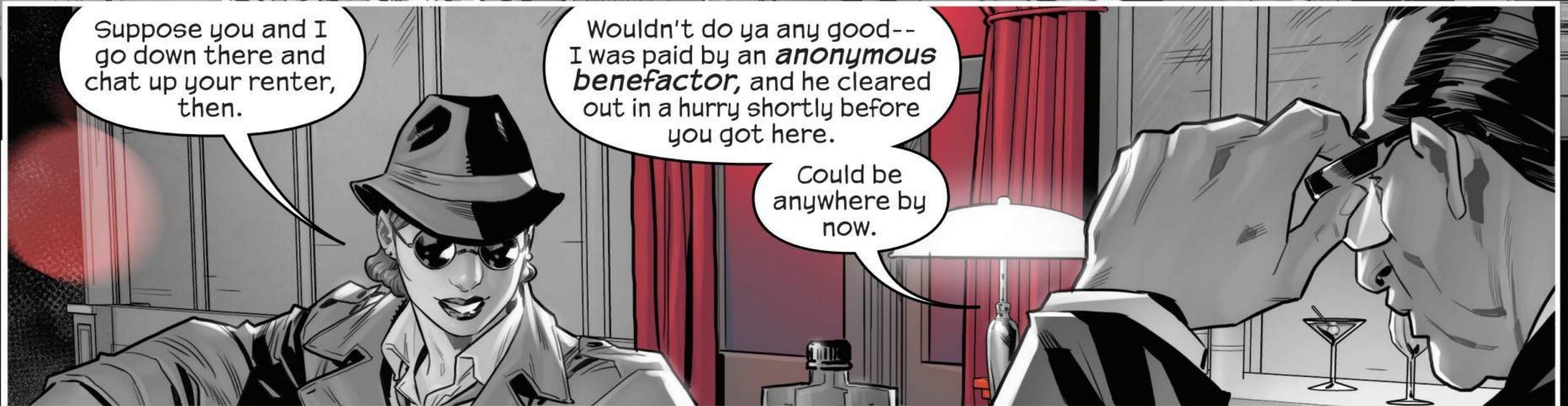




And yet, when Johnny Storm gets spooked, he calls *you*. Screwy, ain't it?

Alicia, he called the *club*. I got a basement suite I rent out to, uh--

--ta folks who don't want the *attention* a regular rental would bring.



Suppose you and I go down there and chat up your renter, then.

Wouldn't do ya any good-- I was paid by an *anonymous benefactor*, and he cleared out in a hurry shortly before you got here.

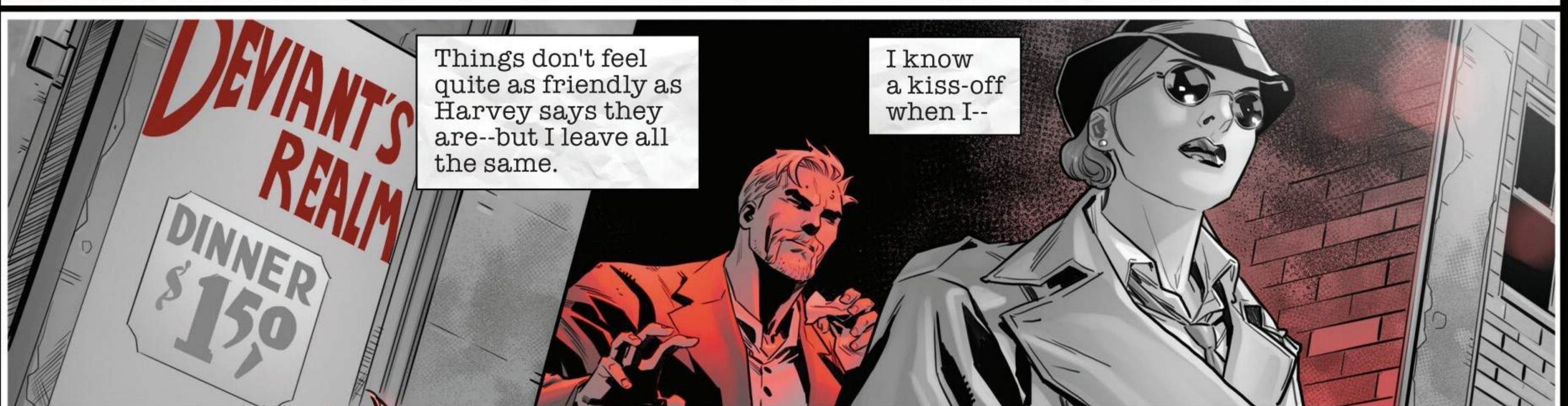
Could be anywhere by now.



And I don't suppose you happened to catch what our anonymous gentleman friend *looked* like.

Now, you know folks rely on my *discretion*, and these old peepers ain't what they used ta be.

But you did me a solid, so you always got a friend in Harvey Elder. Remember that, kid.

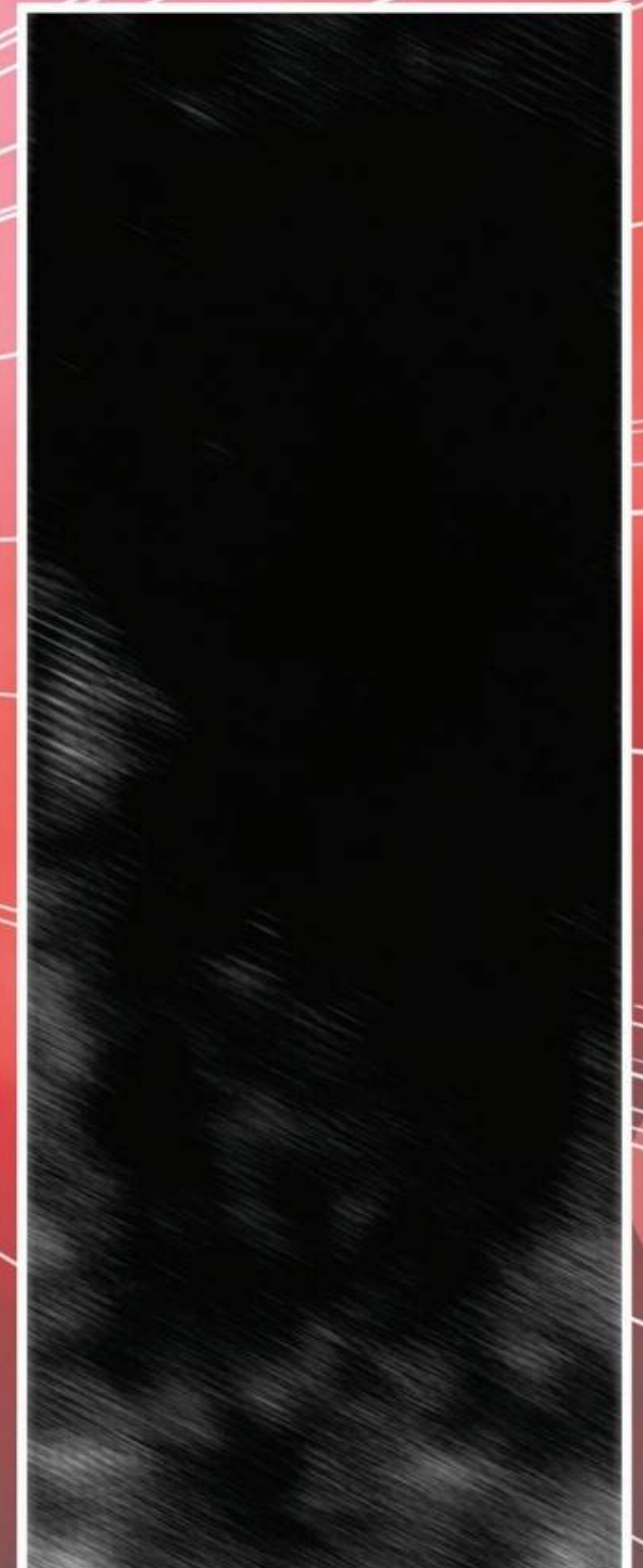


Things don't feel quite as friendly as Harvey says they are--but I leave all the same.

I know a kiss-off when I--



Mmrph!



I wake up to a room that's echoey--so large, mostly empty. Cold too. I'm tied to a chair with heavy rope.

I hear Princess to my right: grumbling--likely muzzled--but not hurt.

Not the best way I've come to, but not the worst either.

And the guy who put me there wants me to know why he did it.

You better leave that Storm kid alone, or there'll be trouble.

For you!

Johnny Storm, you are no good at this. You *blindfolded* a blind woman.

Johnny? Who is "Johnny"? My name is *Brutus D. Widowmaker*, and I--

Untie me, kid, and maybe I can *help* you.

Or at least give you pointers on disguising your voice. Holy Hannah.

I'm sorry, Miss Masters, I'm sorry! I'm just--I'm in over my head really, really bad.

And when he finds out I talked to you, to *anyone*, he'll kill me! He'll *find* me and *kill* me, and there ain't nothing you or anyone *else* can do about it!

Well, let me ask you this, kid: If there's nowhere you can *hide* where whoever this guy is can't kill you...

...why don't you just off yourself *now* and get all that *unpleasantness* over with?



Here lies
Johnny Storm, cruelly
taken before his time by
some senseless act of
arson. Alas, the torch
that got him will
never be found.

Touching
epitaph, kid.
And say, now that
you're *dead*...

...suppose
you put me wise
as to who took your
brother-in-law,
yeah?



Okay, *yes*,
I was stupid. Borrowed
some dough for my cars, then
kept borrowing just t'pay the
juice on the loans. It wasn't long
till I'd gotten in **deep** with
Harvey's mob.

But he told
you straight, Miss
Masters: It wasn't **him**
behind what happened
to Reed.

Out of nowhere, this guy, this
Pete Petruski shows up. Says
he's heard about the jam I'm in.
Says he can get me out of my
"sticky situation," assuming
I do him a favor too.

I say sure.
Fact is, I say, "yes, please."
He's a slimeball, but I'm out
of options, and all he wants
is some dope on **Reed**.
Innocent stuff, right?



But when Reed
disappeared, I see
it's **my** big mouth that
gave Petruski what he
needed t' get past
Reed's security.

I don't know
why he wants him,
Miss Masters, but
I **do** know I messed up,
okay? I've been trying
to figure a way of
fixin' it!



So why call
Petruski?

To warn him
you were close!
If anyone caught
him, he'd **kill** Reed
in a heartbeat!

And you
chloroformed
me for the same
reason.

I'd **never**
forgive myself if
Reed gets kicked off.
Can't you **see** that,
Miss Masters?
Susie would--



Uh--sorry, I meant "see"
metaphorically. I didn't--
I don't--

It's okay, kid.
I'm gonna help
you.

How?

Well.



Figure
I'd start by
saving that
Professor of
yours.

You done
with those
fries?

I pick up Ben. A neighbor'll handle things if the kids wake up and need anything.

If things go well, we'll both be home before that happens.

And if things don't go well...



...well, if life's taught me anything, it's that I can always burn that bridge when I come to it.

It's a rundown building, 'zactly the kinda place you'd expect a mook like Petruski to hide out. Nobody's around ta see you pick the lock either.

We play this quiet, doll. I don't want Pete hearing us until we're good and ready.



Finally, a lucky break: I can hear Petruski's busy with something in the back room. We have a chance to out of here before he gets wise.

The room's filled with clutter, junk, but--

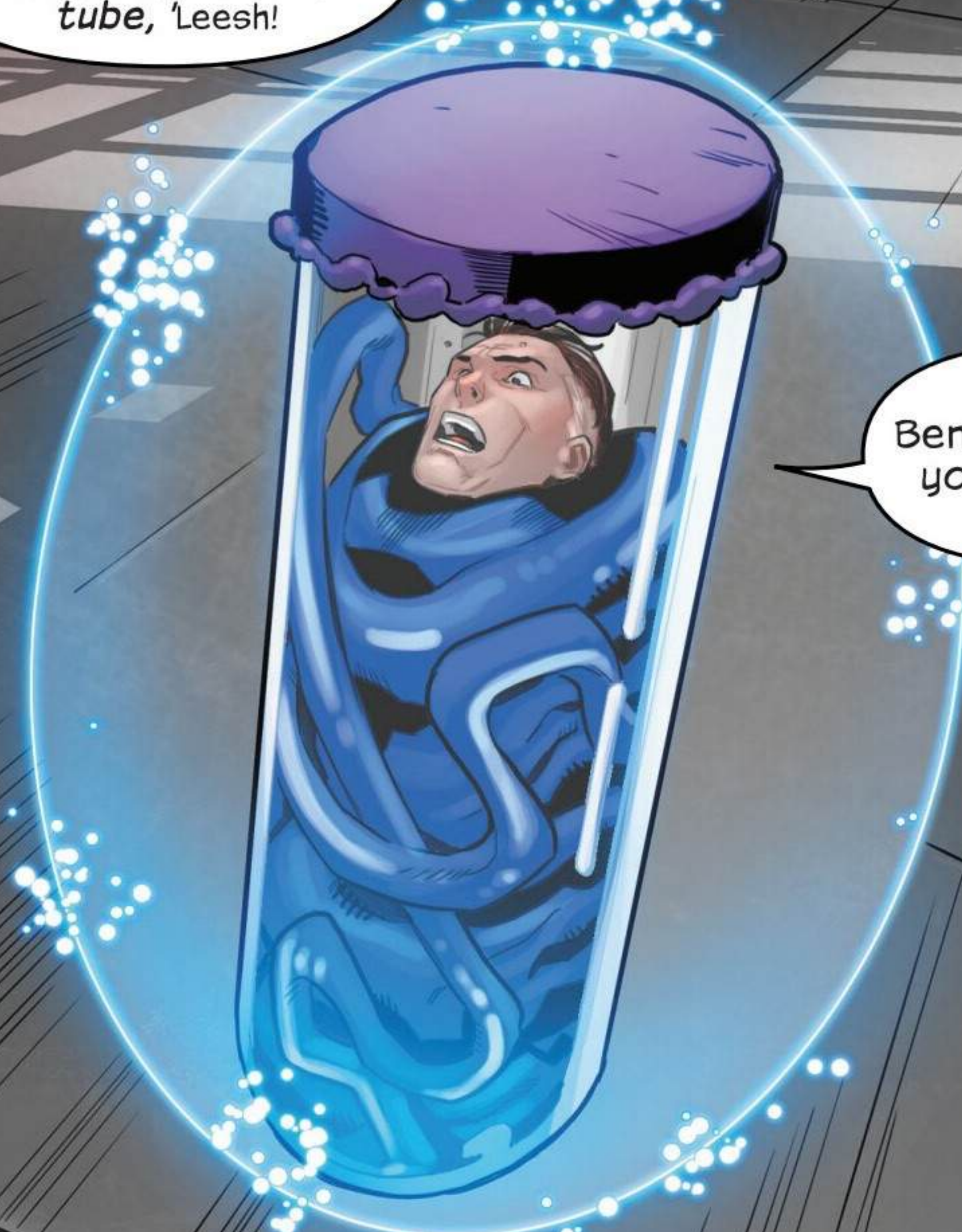
Holy Hannah. We found the Prof, sweet pea.

An' somethin's wrong.



It looks like he's turned into some kinda--*rubber*? He's been stuffed into a *test tube*, 'Leesh!

Alicia! Ben! Old friends, you've got to *help* me!



Trapster got hold of a *Cosmic Cube*, and--

"Trapster"? Cozmic what?

Professor Richards, we don't know who any of these people *are*.

Please. There's no *time*.



"Trapster's first attempt to rewrite reality accidentally changed everything to this--this *retro* world.

"Whether it came from his *subconscious* or some *film* he watched last night, I don't know--Pete isn't exactly what you'd call a *mentally disciplined* man.

"But Trapster's changes altered *him* too, causing him to be *subsumed* into this fantasy--to *forget* all about the cube!

"And I couldn't stop him, having already been *trapped* in this prison he *designed*.

"Sue put up force-fields to protect us against being changed, but even *they* soon fell against the might of the Cosmic Cube.

The cube's *invisible* in this new reality--it doesn't fit in, you see--but that doesn't mean it's not *there*. It was in the corner, Alicia, six paces northeast from you!

"She used the last of her strength to save *me*--but even that force-field has been *weakening* since then. I estimate it's going to fail in mere *seconds*."

I beg you: *Wield* it. Wish for things to return to the way they were before Pete *changed* things, before--





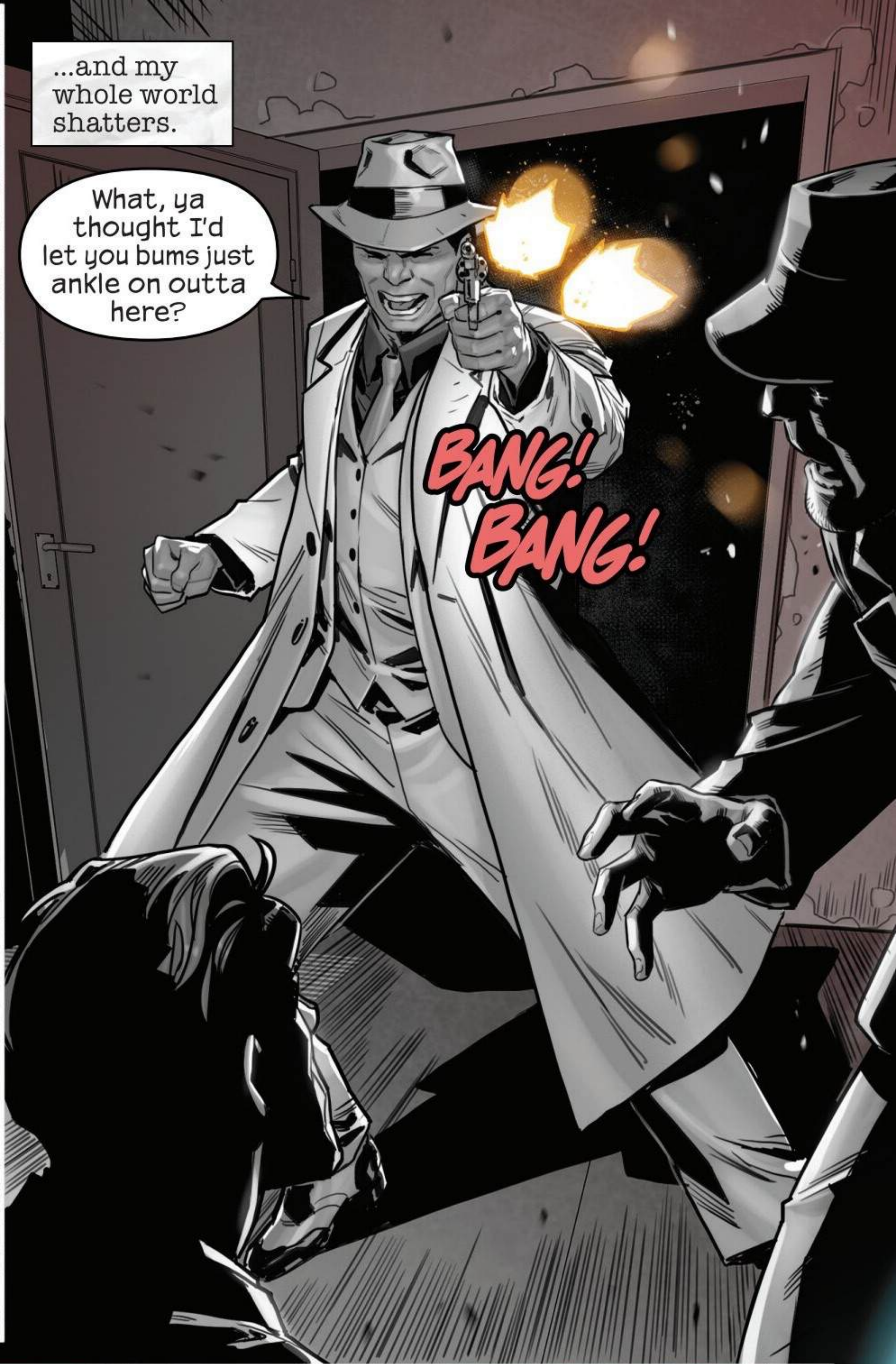
Prof Richards!
There ya are!

My darling Susie--
she must've sent you both!
Free me, quickly! It's only
logical that the malevolent
miscontent who snatched
me won't be waylaid
for long!

But it's too late.
I hear the door
handle turn
behind me...

...and my
whole world
shatters.

What, ya
thought I'd
let you bums just
ankle on outta
here?



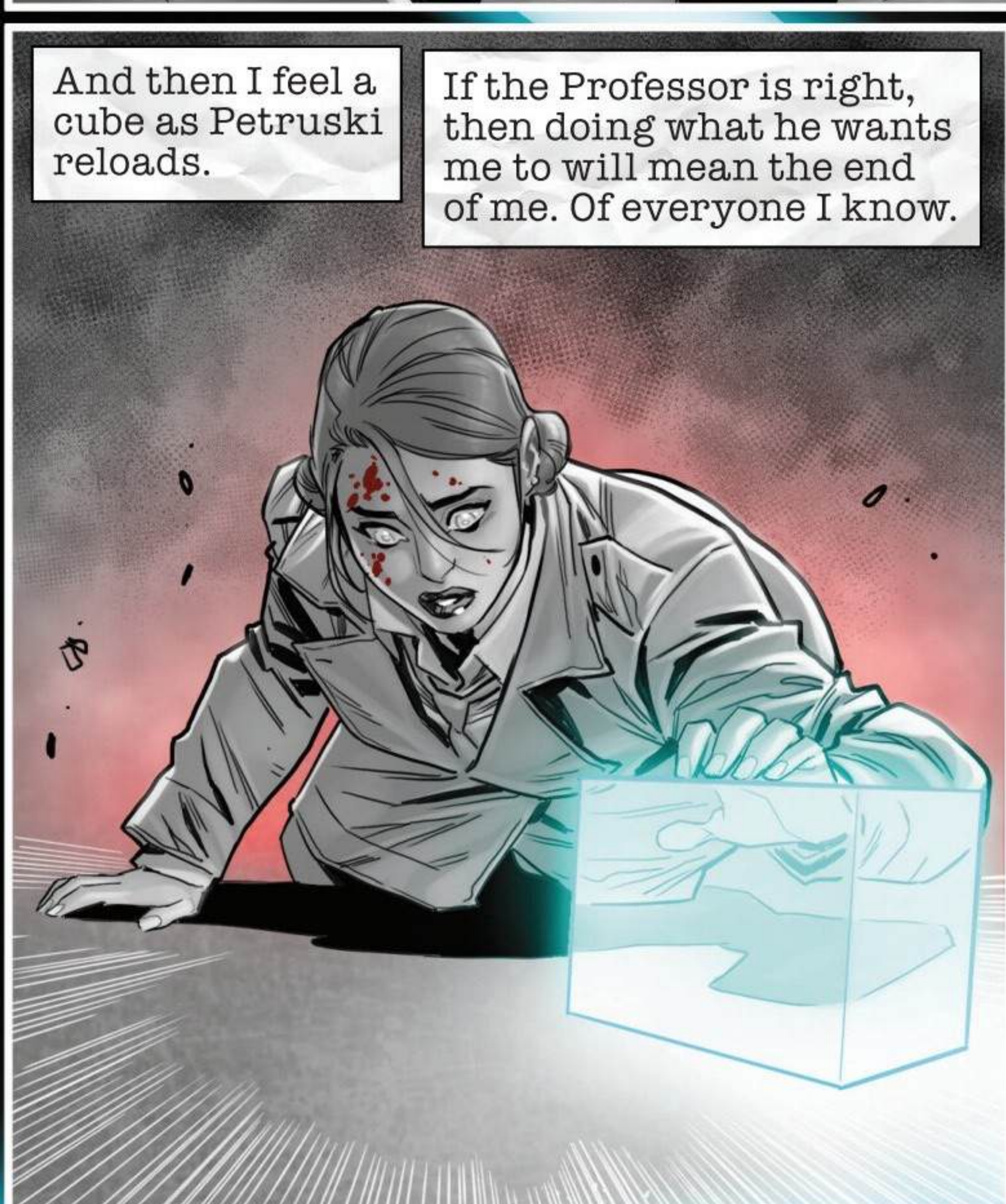
BANG!
BANG!



He's throwing lead.
I hear six shots. Eight.

The professor gasps,
and the man I love
cries out in pain.

Someone's blood
splashes hot onto my
face, hard enough that
I know it's arterial.



And then I feel a
cube as Petruski
reloads.

If the Professor is right,
then doing what he wants
me to will mean the end
of me. Of everyone I know.

But I also know that
between my husband
and the Prof, someone's
making a heavy, wet
gurgle, the kind of
noise you only ever
make once--

--and someone
else isn't
making any
noise at all.



I think of Ben and our kids,
the way they sound when
they say they love me.

My life. The life I wanted,
the life I fought so hard for--
all for just a taste of it.

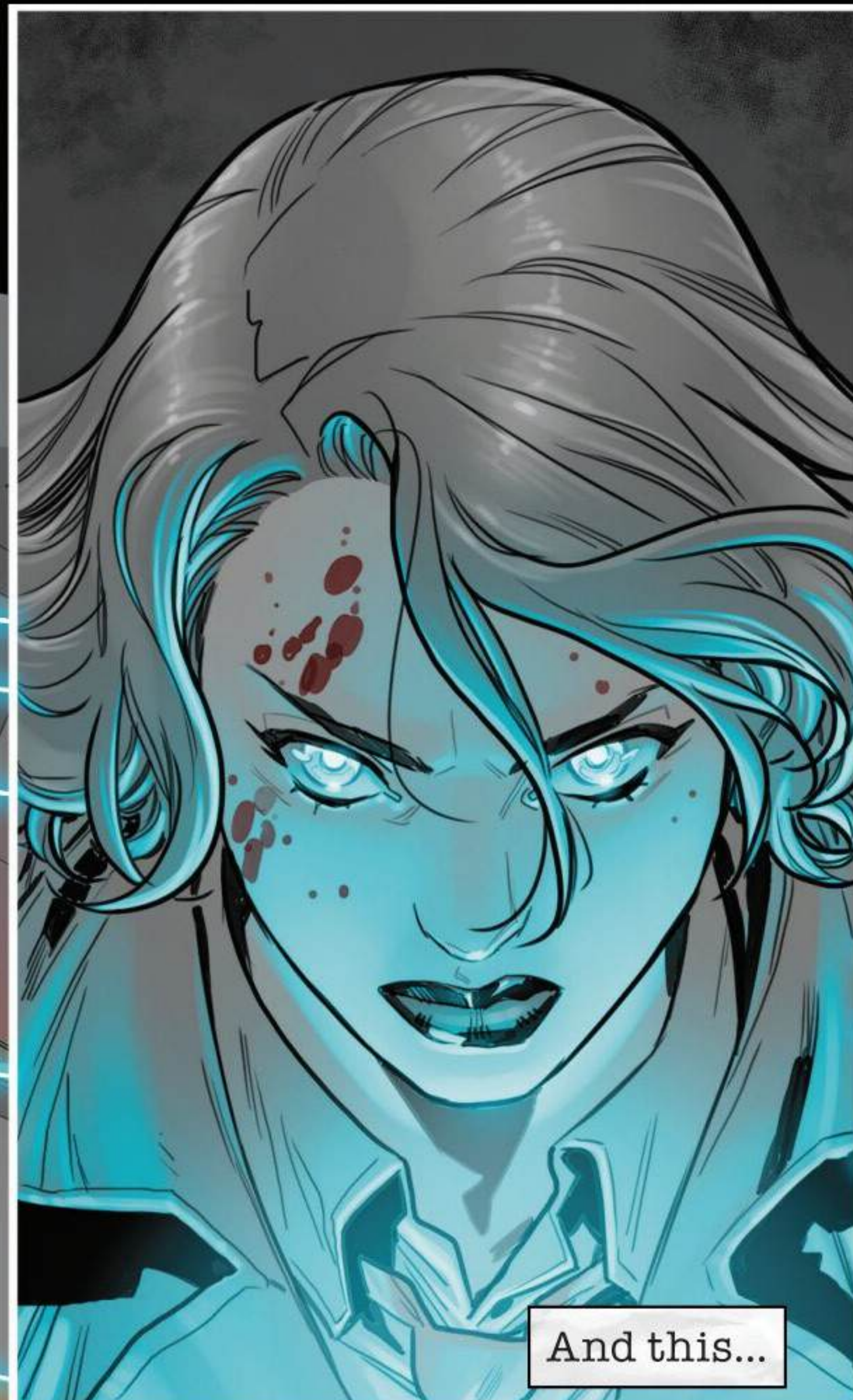


And I know as I hear a
fresh magazine click into
place that I don't want
Pete to get away with this.

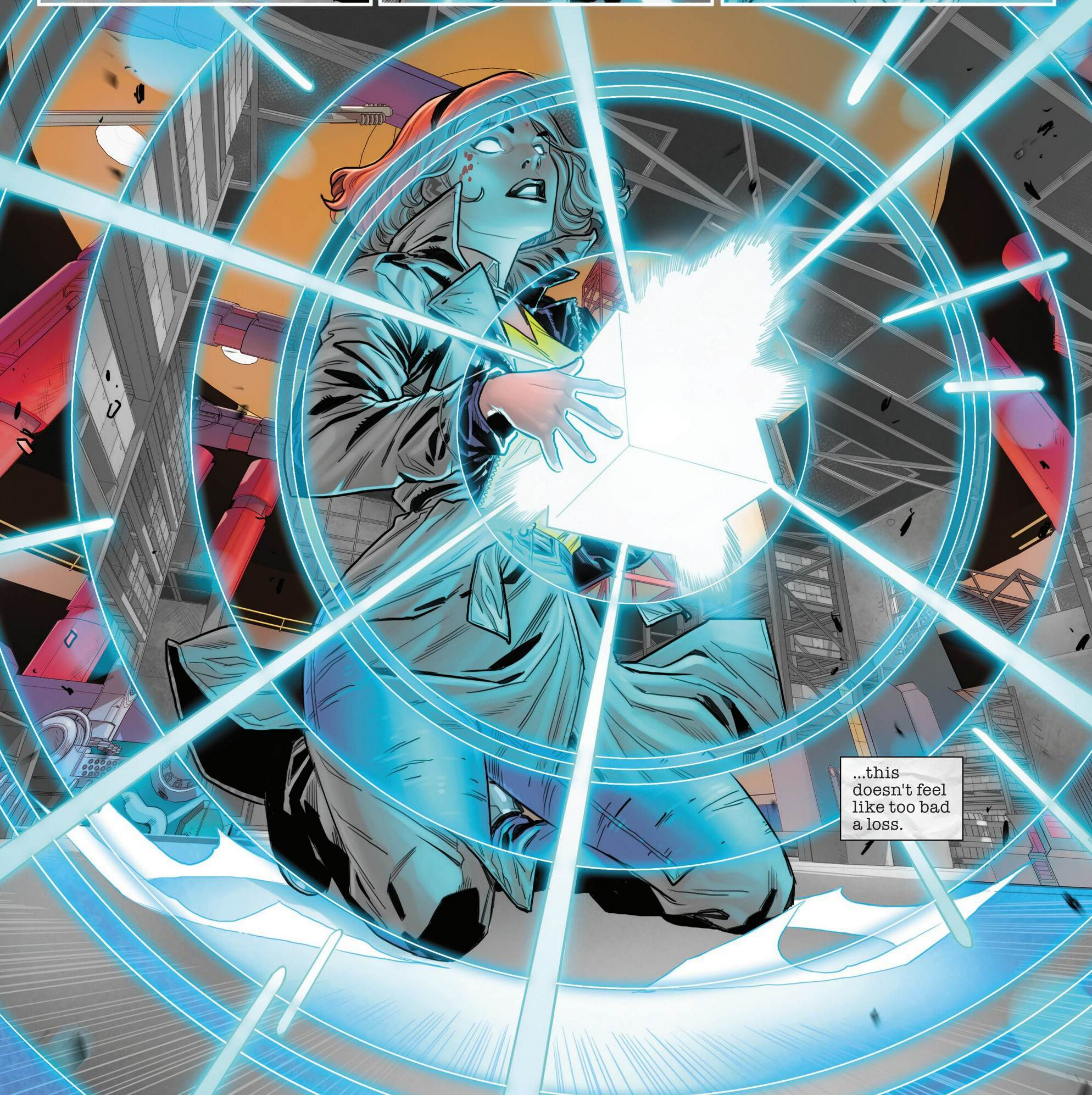
Us private dicks--we don't get
happy endings. We don't get
to win. Not in the long term.



Best we can hope for is to
not lose too bad in the end.



And this...



...this
doesn't feel
like too bad
a loss.



Before you: two of the greatest heroes on Earth--men who have boldly explored the universe, challenged the unknown and adventured into the fantastic countless times!

And while the loss of the Baxter Building may have sent them to Arizona... its return *hasn't* solved all their problems.

There are still liens against the Fantastic Four's resources in New York City, and Ben Grimm and Johnny Storm want to earn their keep! And so, as we join these two *mighty* heroes, we find they've decided...

Ahhhh... now *this* is th' life, huh? Ain't nobody gonna bust into this brewery when *we're* workin' security!

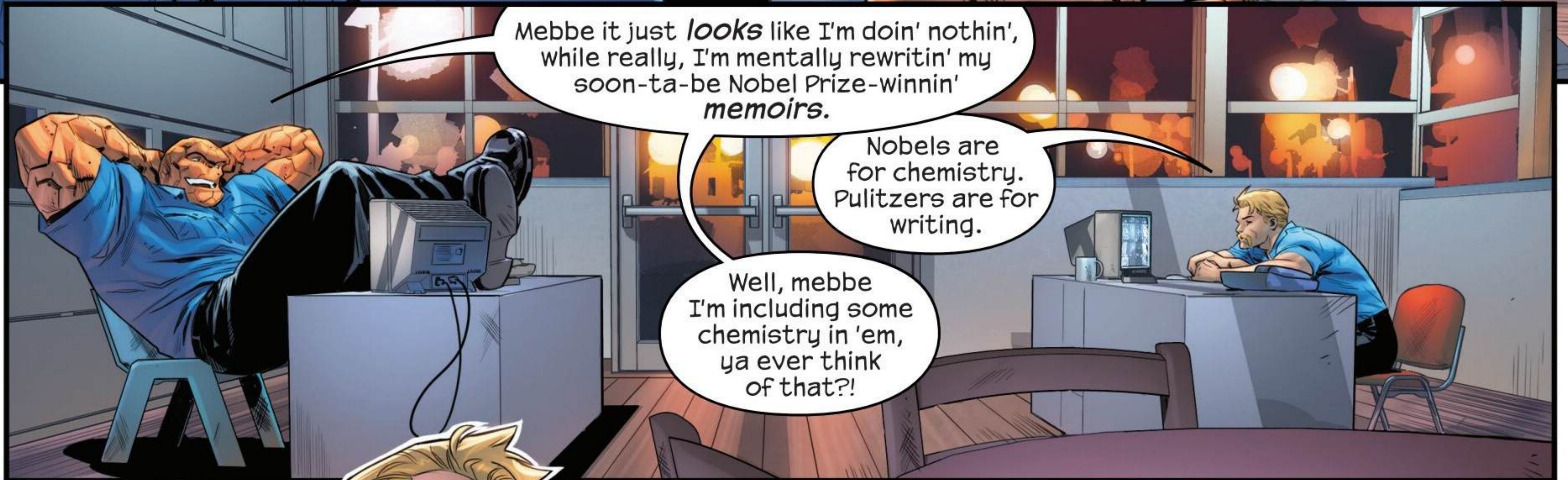
Right there, just now: That was it. That was the single most boring moment in my life.

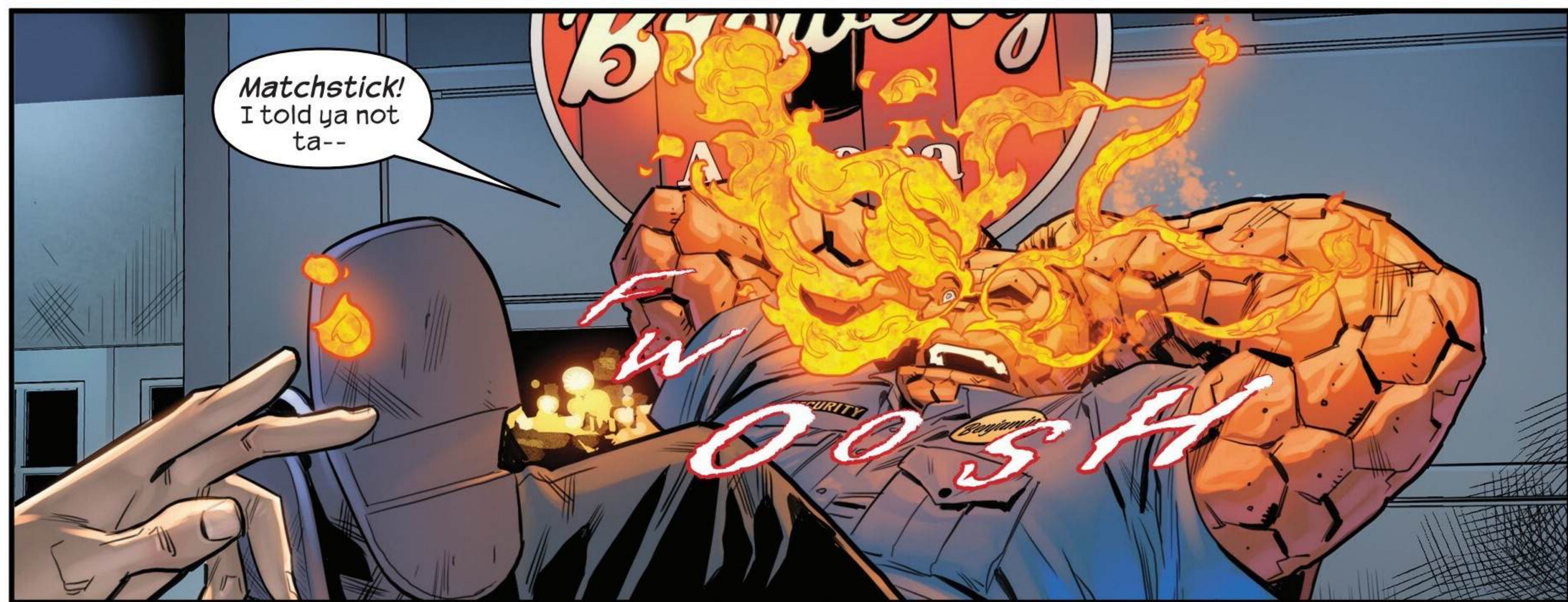
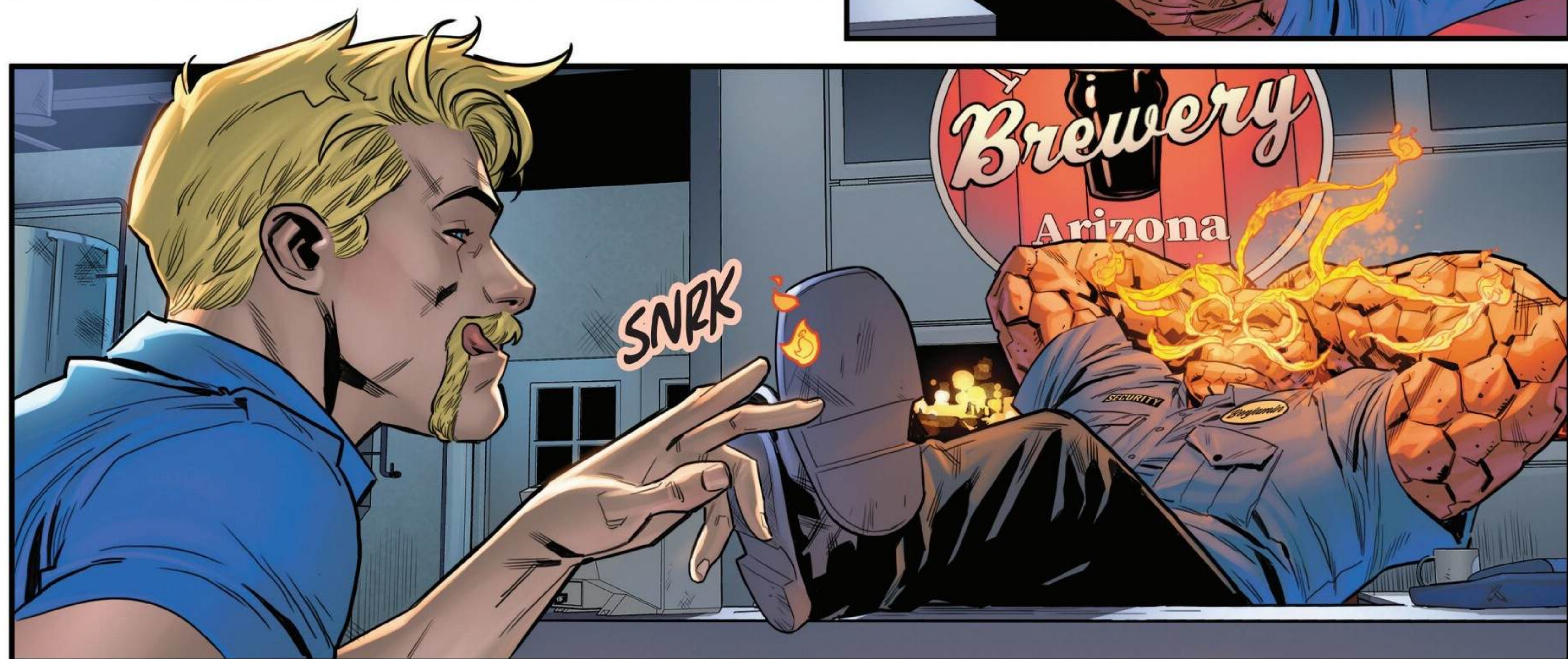
...
...Nope, I was wrong-- it's this one.

...to get jobs.

BEN GRIMM AND
JOHNNY STORM IN:

"TO WORK WONDERS"







FWOOOOOOSH

--do--

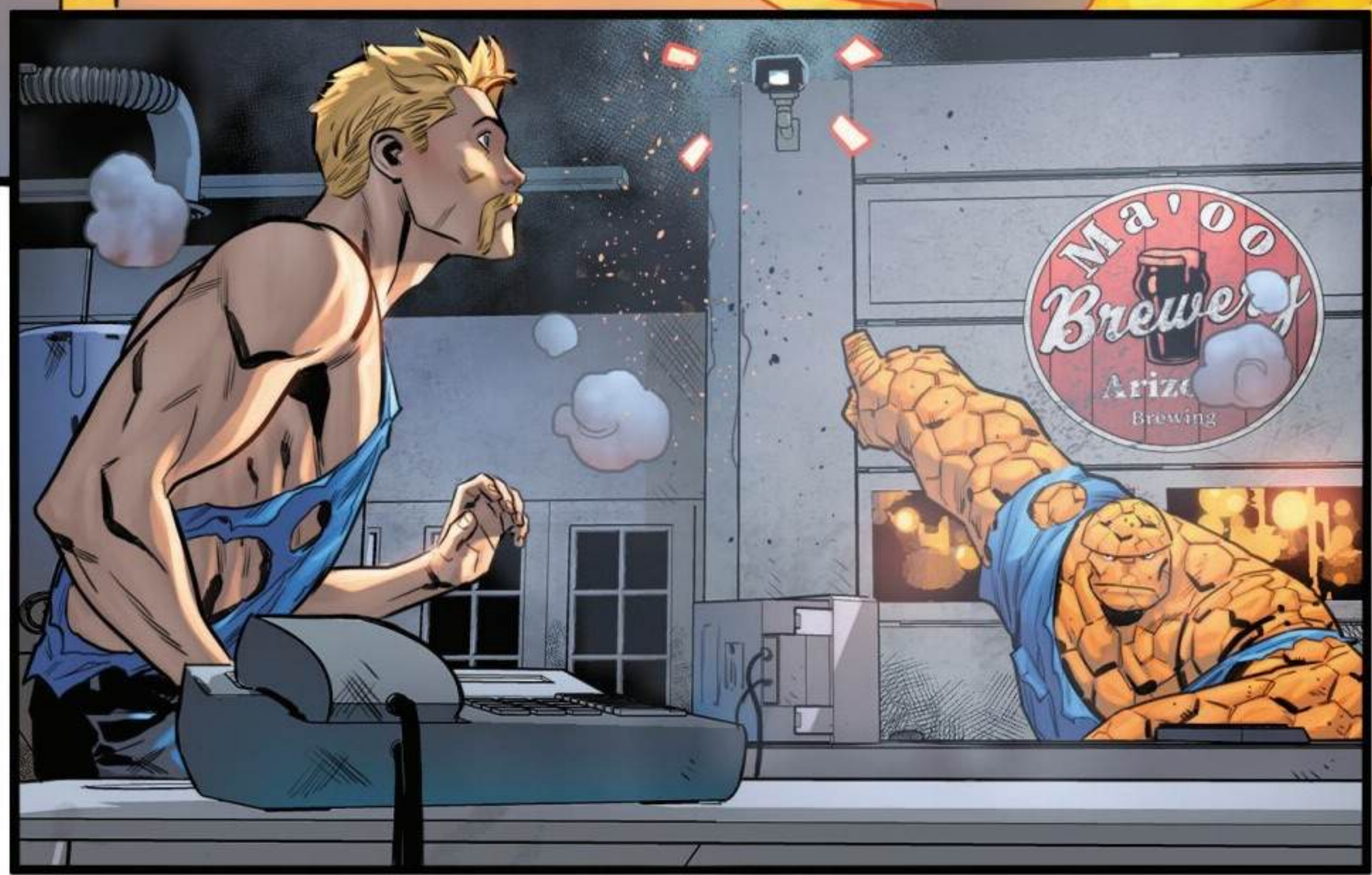


--that!

I absorbed the flames, I absorbed the flames!! We're okay!

We're *alive*, but we ain't *okay*! When Peterson finds out, he's gonna *can* *us* fer sure!

Okay, but, like, *will* he find out? Nobody got exploded, we're fine and the brewery's fine, so... no harm, no foul, right?



He hung up on me! RUDE.

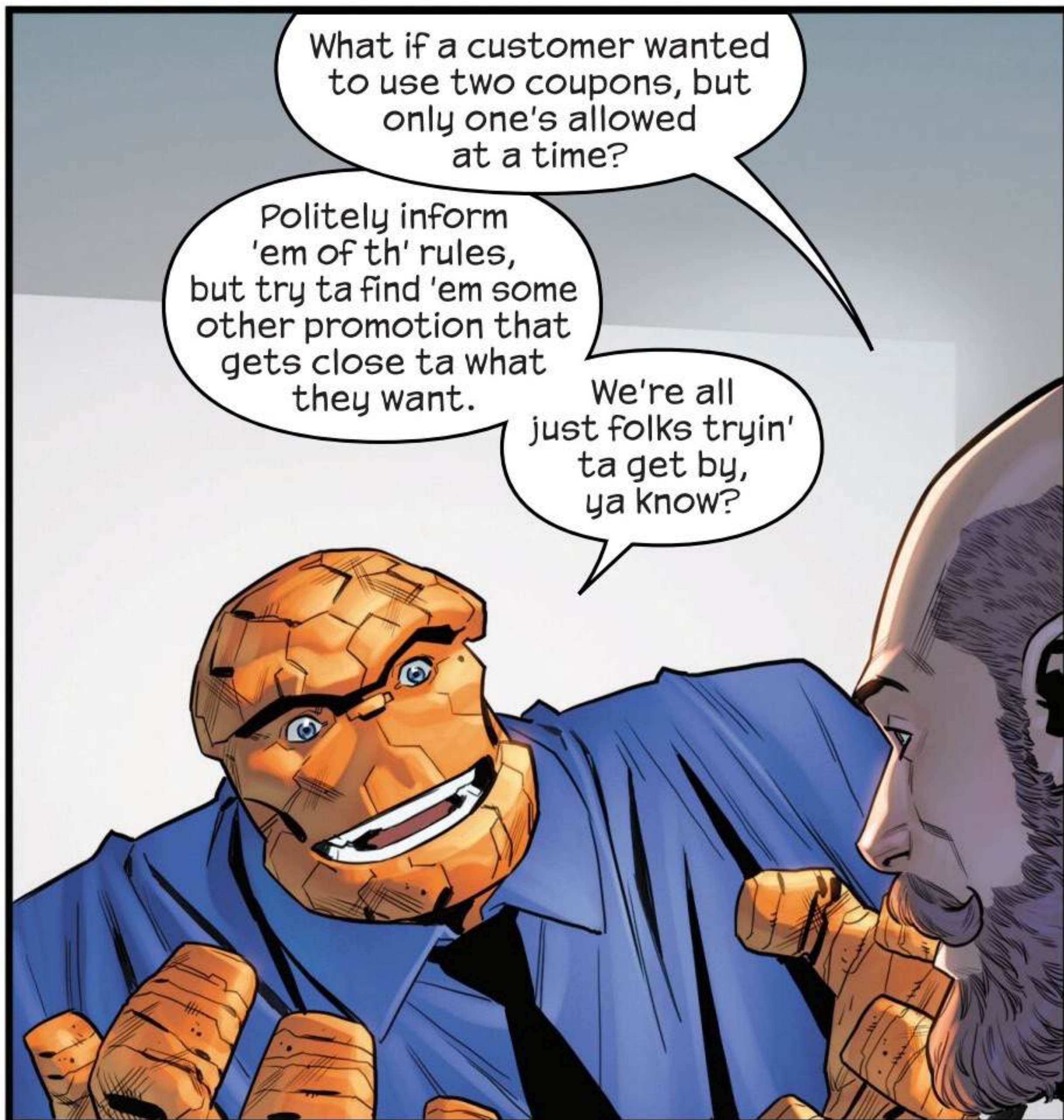
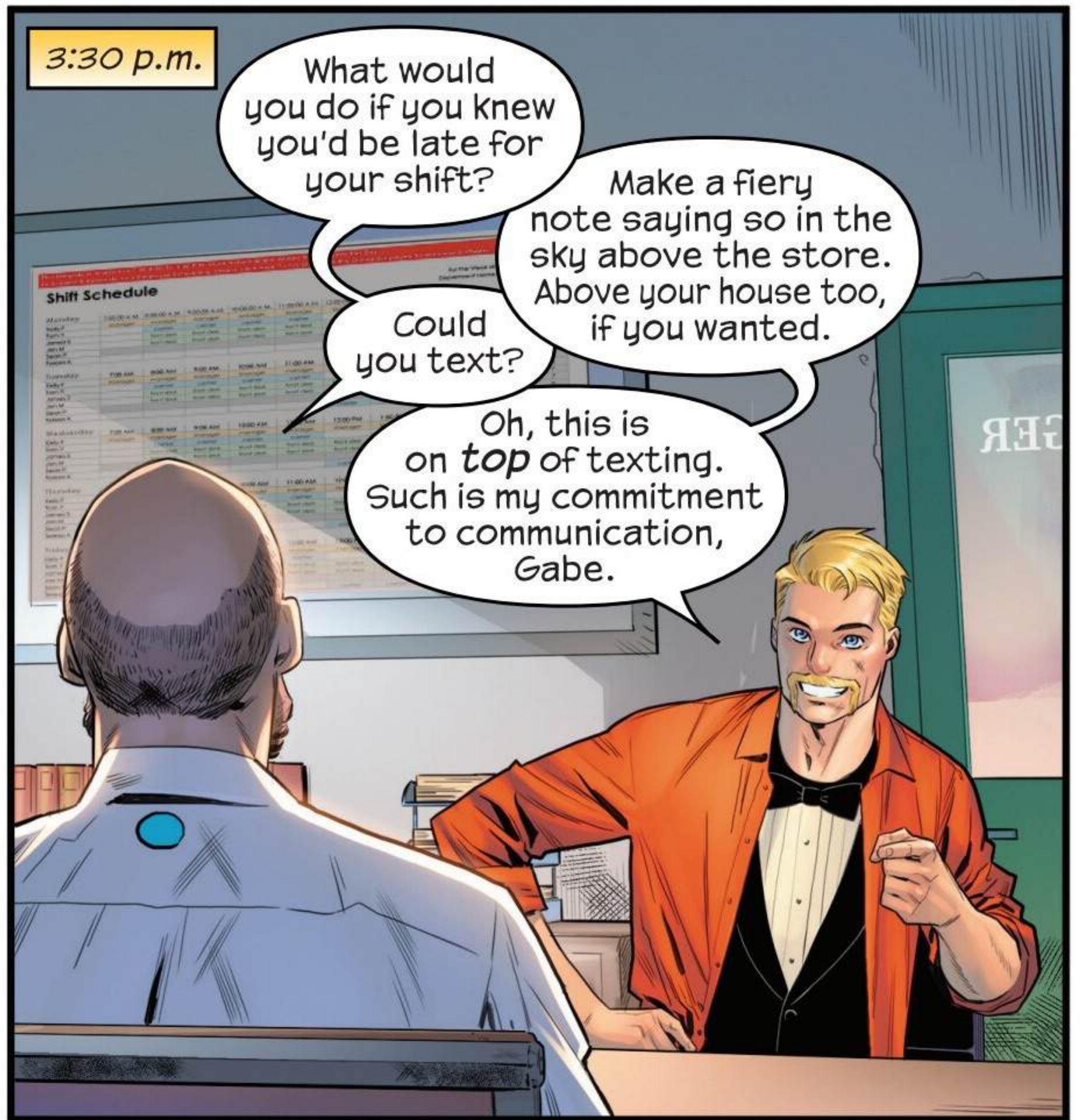
MATCHSTICK!!



Why hello, Mr. Peterson! To what do I owe this unexpected--?

...Uh-huh. Right. Well, tough but fair. But in our defense, you didn't *explicitly* tell *me* how explosive grain dust is, so...

...Mr. Peterson?





For the luvva--we agreed to work *different* jobs from now on! This is *my* gig, Johnny! Scram!

Well, you never told me *where* you were applying to, Stone Dome, so tough cookies!



And, hey, it's *my* job now too, so looks like you're just gonna have to deal with it!

No, uh-uh, no way. Ya already got me fired *once*, and it ain't happening again! Tell Gabe ya can't work here!



Give me all the money in the tills or I *shoot!* I'll kill all of you!

What? Why should *I* have to quit?!

If you hate *me* being here so much, *you* quit!



I'm serious--gimme the cash, *now*, or I start firing!! I'll *kill* people, I don't care!

I wuz here first, and I *like* it here! I'm good at this!

So what?! I'm gonna be amazing at this. **CASHIER ON!**



SWOOP

GRRRRK

Then *prove* it by gettin' a job somewhere else an' leavin' *me* in peace!

Funny, I was about to tell you the same thing!!

"Cashier on" ain't even a *catchphrase*!

Anything's a catchphrase if you say it enough!



I swear, Flame Brain, if ya--

2

3

You two are *heroes*-- I don't care what they say in New York!

That was amazing. Wait till my girlfriend hears I get to hang out all day with half of the *Fantastic Four*!

Incredible! Let's hear it for the new guys!

I knew I made the right call hiring you! Please, *please* tell me you're not actually quitting--I took a chance on you both, and you're already proving me right! You *saved* us all!

Well, I-- that is ta say, uh--

Quit? Us? *Never!*

Ben and I have been in the FF for *years*, but now we're *both* looking forward to an all-new, all-different adventure: being valued members of the Foodtopia corporate team. No---corporate *family*.

Ain't that right, Benjy boy? You'd never let down these hardworking *teammates*, would ya?

Well...no, not when ya put it like *that*...

Of course not! It's *collaboratin'* time!

Aw, fer the luvva...

THAT NIGHT...

He's stealin' *my* job, Alicia! From *me*!

Cathy's still hiring cashiers at Wisniewski's, babe. Why don't you--?

Oh no! I ain't giving Matchstick the *satisfaction*.

Besides, Bossman Gabe set up this new contest fer *Cashier 'a the Month*. Whoever has the most satisfied customers wins.

An' I'll tell ya right now, Leesh, *that's* gonna be *me*.

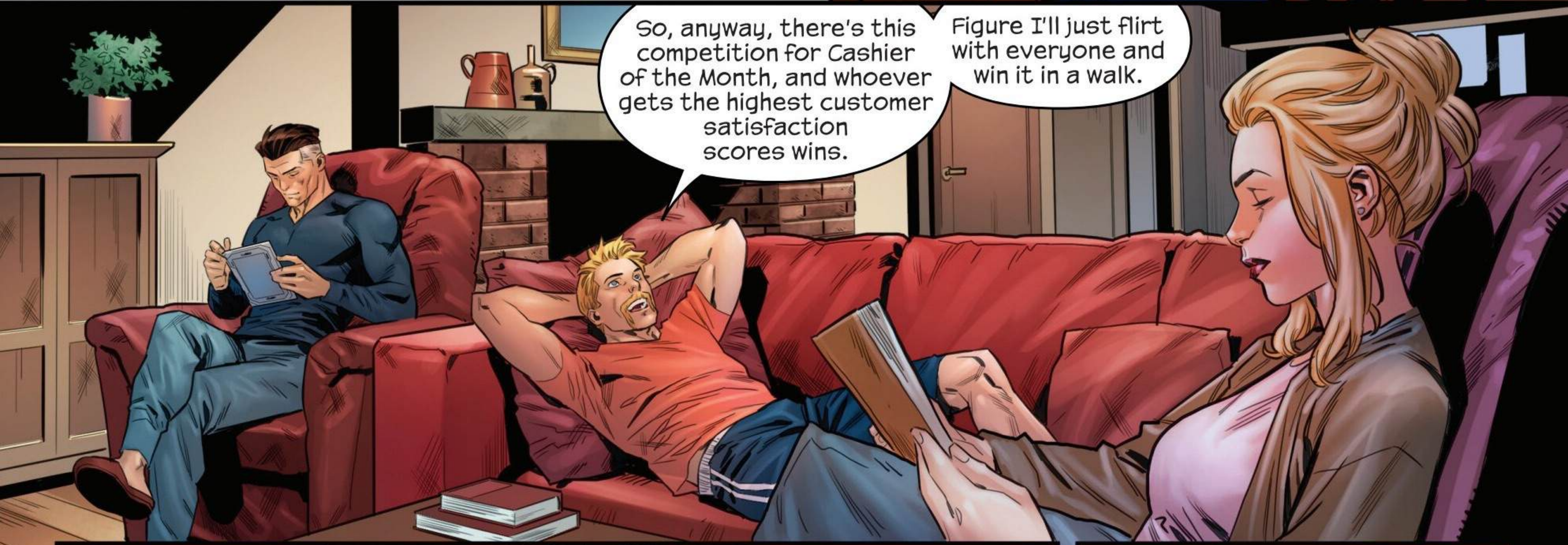
If we're gonna be workin' *together*, then I'm gonna show Johnny what work, hard work, *really* is.

I'm gonna be *polite* an' *courteous* an' *efficient*, and ol' hothead can't do *ANY* of that. Folks are gonna *love* ol' blue-eyed Ben.



So, anyway, there's this competition for Cashier of the Month, and whoever gets the highest customer satisfaction scores wins.

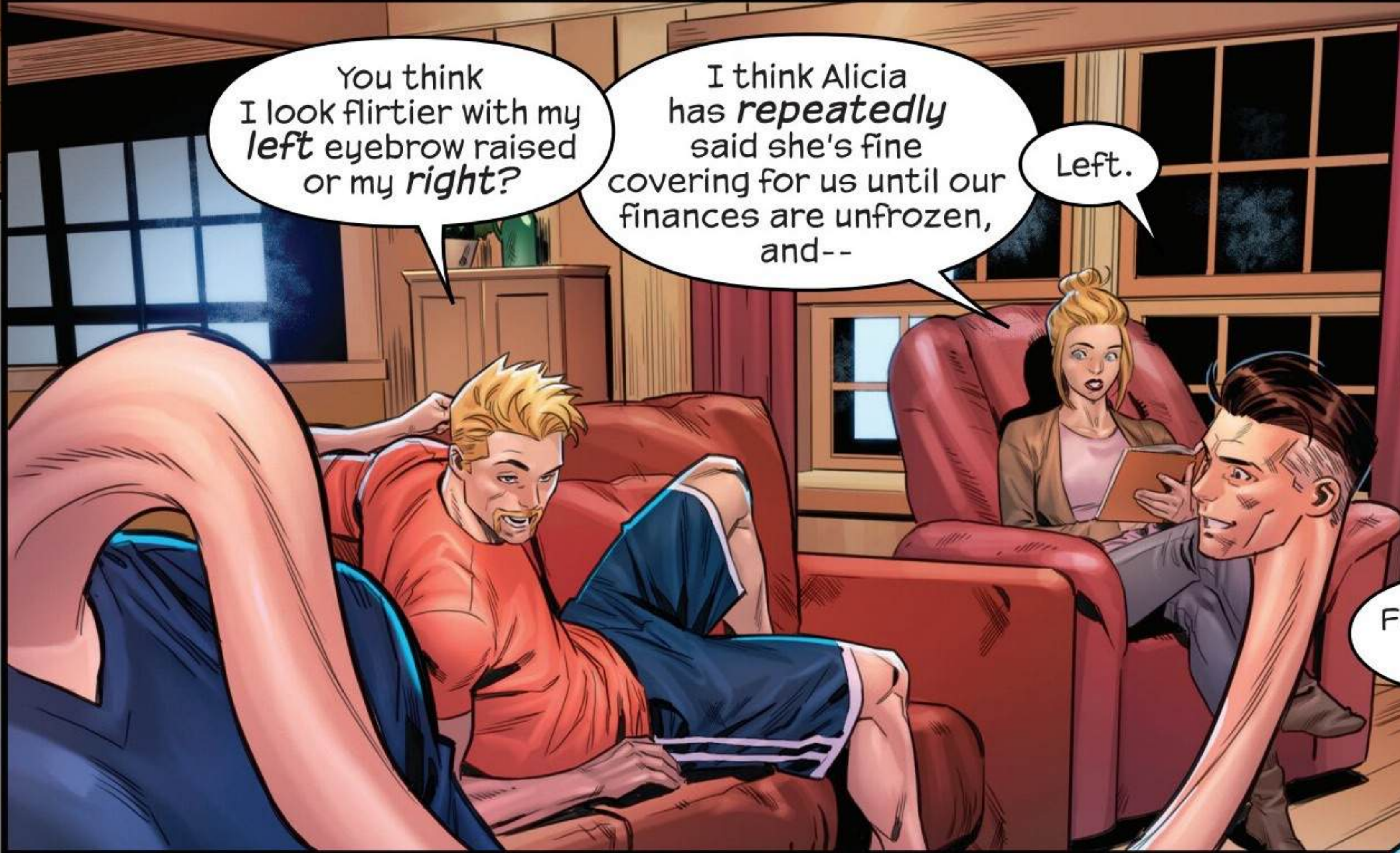
Figure I'll just flirt with everyone and win it in a walk.



You think I look flirtier with my *left* eyebrow raised or my *right*?

I think Alicia has *repeatedly* said she's fine covering for us until our finances are unfrozen, and--

Left.



Flame on, baby.



AND SO...

Love that shirt on you, Ash. Hey, you want your rotisserie chicken hotter and your ice cream cooler?

Oh my gosh, Johnny, yes, please.

And here's your change, and, hey-- when I see you here next week, Denise, I wanna know if your Edie got into that college she wanted, ya hear?

Oh, you will. Ta, Benjamin!

AND SO...

I saw some *great* work from all of you this month. Well done to the whole team.

But there can only be one *Cashier of the Month*--

--and it gives me *great* pleasure to announce...

...that I was wrong earlier when I said there can only be one because our two newest cashiers have *tied* in customer satisfaction, and they'll be *splitting* both the title and the \$100 bonus!

clap! clap! clap! clap! clap!



A tie indicates you **both** won. Logically, you should **both** be happy.

And the money you make is going toward general household expenses, right? So none of this matters?

That's a great point, Val. Ben and Johnny **were** going to share the prize anyway.

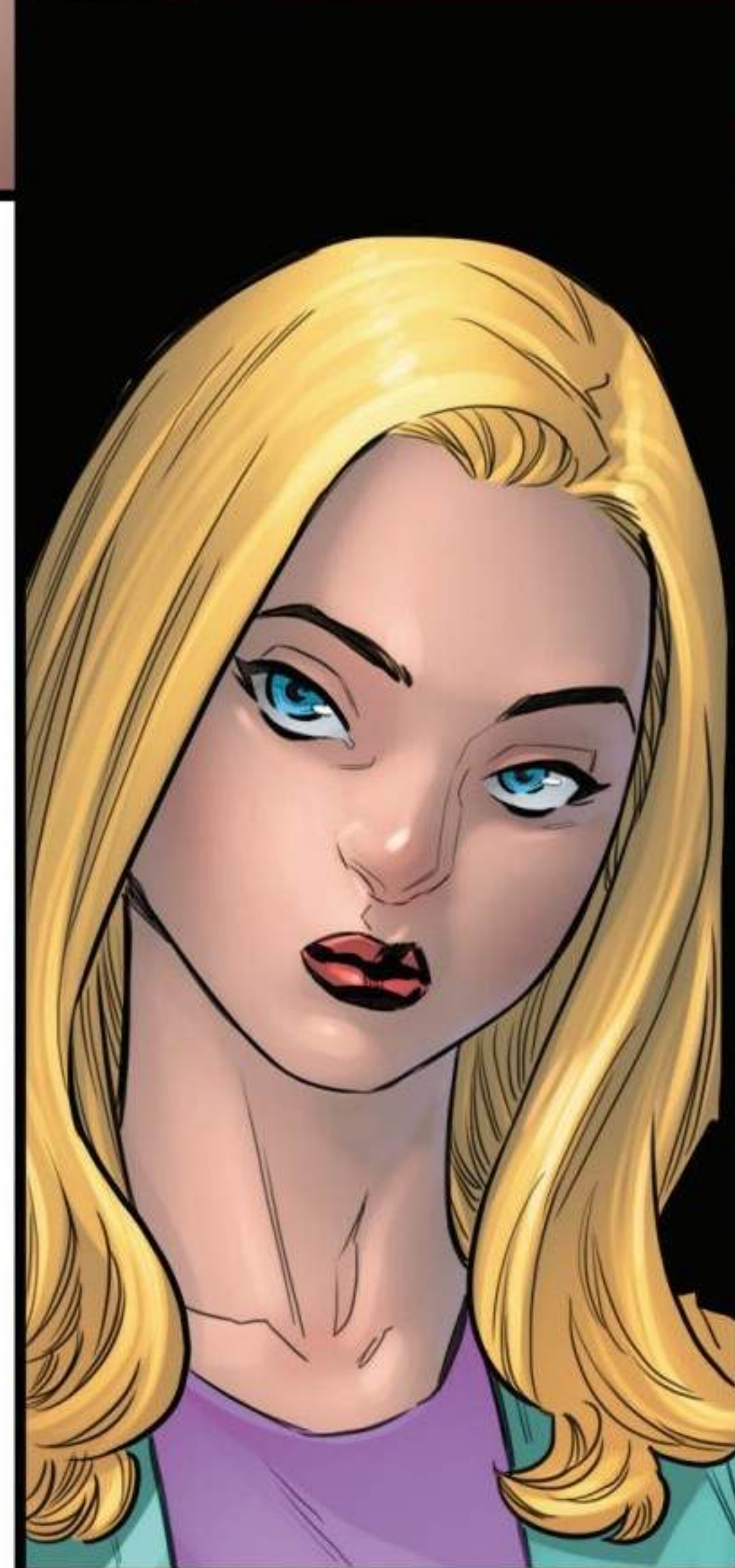
Okay, **true**, but that's not the point!



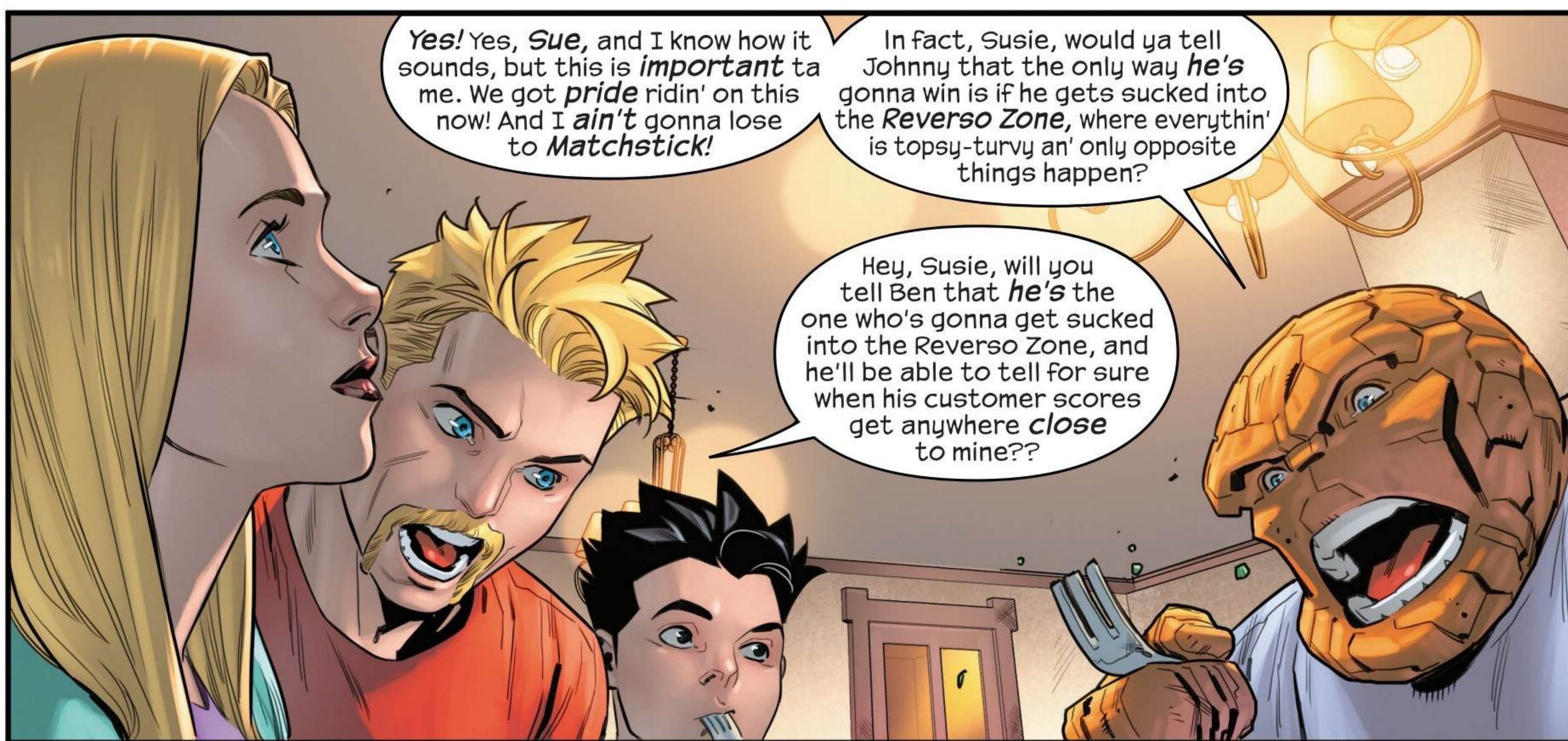
The **point** is that I'm gonna **win** the next **Cashier of the Month**--

Hah!

--and I'm winning it **alone**, which incidentally will finally prove **once and for all** which of us--the **Human Torch** or the **Thing**--is the **best**.



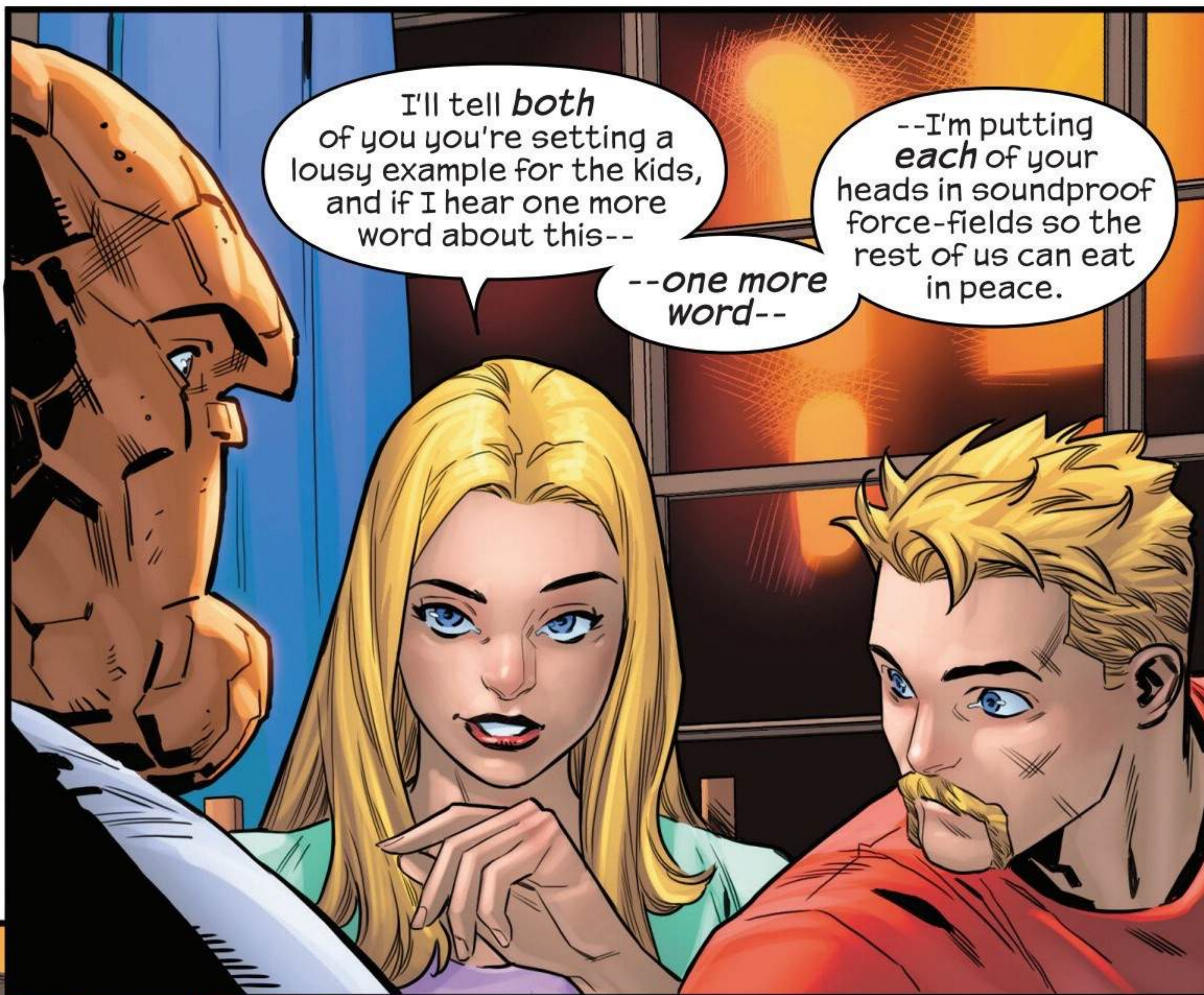
...At grocery-store cashiering.



Yes! Yes, **Sue**, and I know how it sounds, but this is **important** to me. We got **pride** ridin' on this now! And I **ain't** gonna lose to **Matchstick!**

In fact, **Susie**, would ya tell Johnny that the only way **he's** gonna win is if he gets sucked into the **Reverso Zone**, where everythin' is topsy-turvy an' only opposite things happen?

Hey, **Susie**, will you tell Ben that **he's** the one who's gonna get sucked into the **Reverso Zone**, and he'll be able to tell for sure when his customer scores get anywhere **close** to mine??



I'll tell *both* of you you're setting a lousy example for the kids, and if I hear one more word about this--

--one more word--

--I'm putting *each* of your heads in soundproof force-fields so the rest of us can eat in peace.



Then *please* tell Ben that--



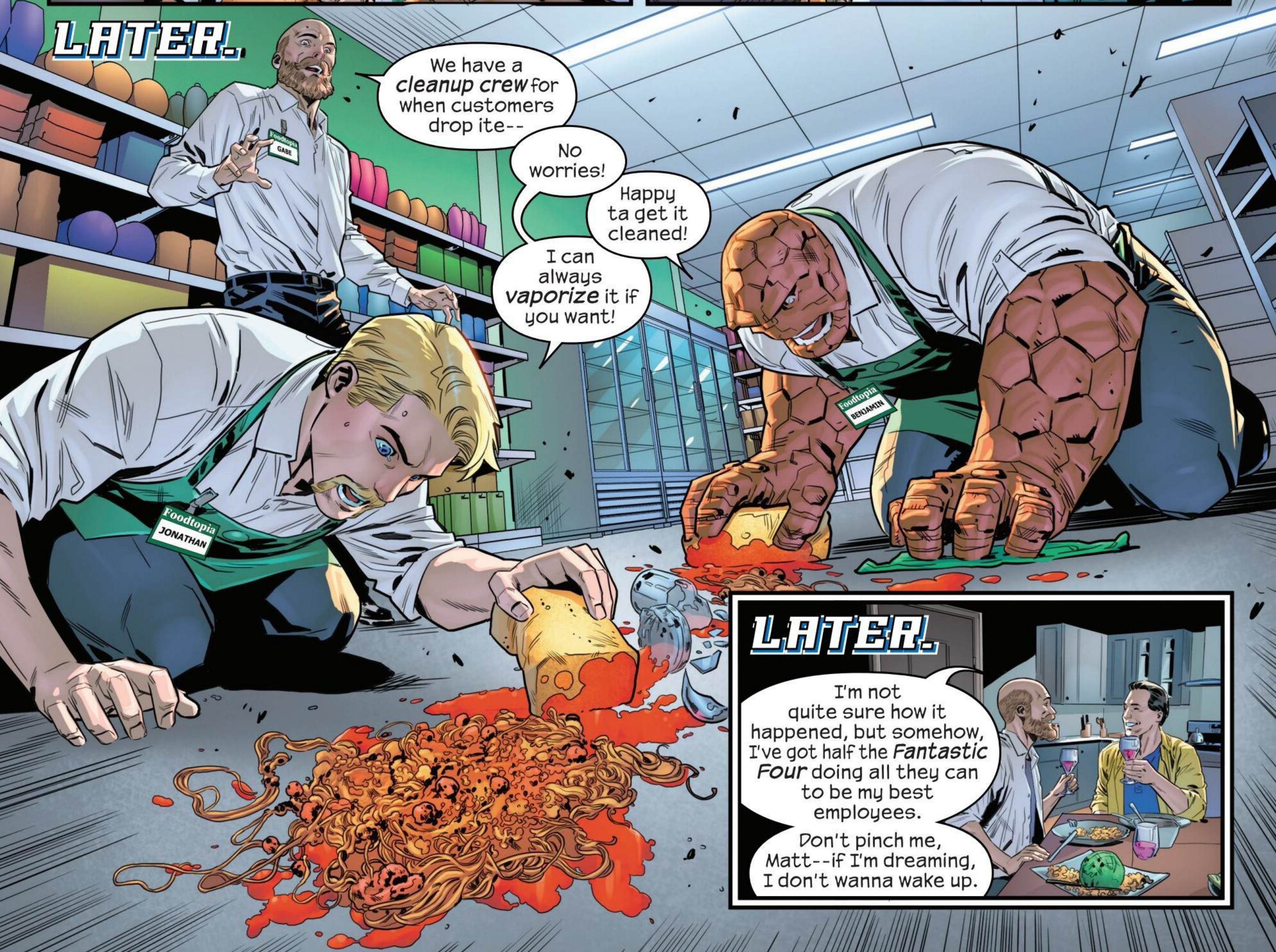
HAH HAH HAH!

Amazin'! Hey, Johnny, how do ya shut up a second-place flame brain? You--



Franklin, would you pass the mashed Earth-potatoes, please?

A'yup.



AND
SO...



And you tell yer grandkid that if she really wants ta be a **volcano** for Hallowe'en, I'm more 'n happy to have her come out with us, wit' me as one 'a her boulders.

She'll be **thrilled**, Ben.



See you next time!

Wouldn't miss it!

Dine!



Hey, is Johnny Storm here?

Oh, *he's* two minutes late comin' back from break. Can I help ya instead?



Will he be back soon?

Yeah, probably. But between you, me an' the Cheezies, I can get you checked out faster than he can on his best day.

Oh, no, I'm actually here to interview him.

Name's Chet. I'm doing a "Where are they now?" story for *World Enquirer*: We're on a nostalgia kick, and Johnny was a mainstay during his *teen-idol* years.



Took me forever to track him down to this town. He's not--he's not *actually* working here, is he?



Why, Chet, my good man...

...I do believe I see the answer to that very question walkin' toward us as we speak.



Mr. Storm! Chet Owens, reporter. Can I get a picture, ask you a few questions?

Sure, man! *Always* have time for my adoring public.



Great! So how are you enjoying life in Arizona? Quite a *change* from New York City, huh?

Oh, for sure, but honestly? It's *great*. There's good people everywhere, and I'm always happy to help.

The *Human Torch* is on your side, kids!

KLIK!



Where do you live here?

Just with my sister and her husband--Sue and Reed. And also with Ben over there, and Alicia--that's his wife. And each couple has a couple kids too, so four total.

All--*nine* of you, is it?--in the same house?



Yeah! The money ran out in NYC, and Ben knew a place that'd been empty here forever, so--off we went! Bit of a squeeze for sure, but we make it work. And honestly, I love it here. I just love life, y'know?

And now you work as a cashier in a grocery store. Minimum wage?



I mean, I just started, so, yeah.

Incredible.



...Hey, Chet?

Um, why are you writing down so much?



Listen, Johnny. I like you--I do--and know it's not always fair how the tabloids have treated you, but I'm a **journalist**, and this is a hell of a scoop.

Former teen heartthrob and global super hero Johnny Storm's all grown up...and he's **broke**?



And he's run out of town, out of the **state**, out of half the country, **and** he's squatting with eight other people--including **children**--in an **abandoned** house in God-knows-where, **Arizona**, scraping by on **minimum wage**?

How the mighty have fallen, huh?



Um--well, it's Ben's Aunt Petunia's place, so, uh, I don't **think** it's squatting, right?

Do you pay her rent?

Well, **no**, but--

And what's going on with that **mustache**?



As a reporter, I gotta ask: Did you lose a **bet**, Johnny?

I... No, I--I love it-- **people** love it, they--

Honestly though-- if the cashier thing doesn't pan out, does that mustache mean our readers can look forward to you doing **exotic dancing**?



But it's not--

I'm not--



It's not like that.





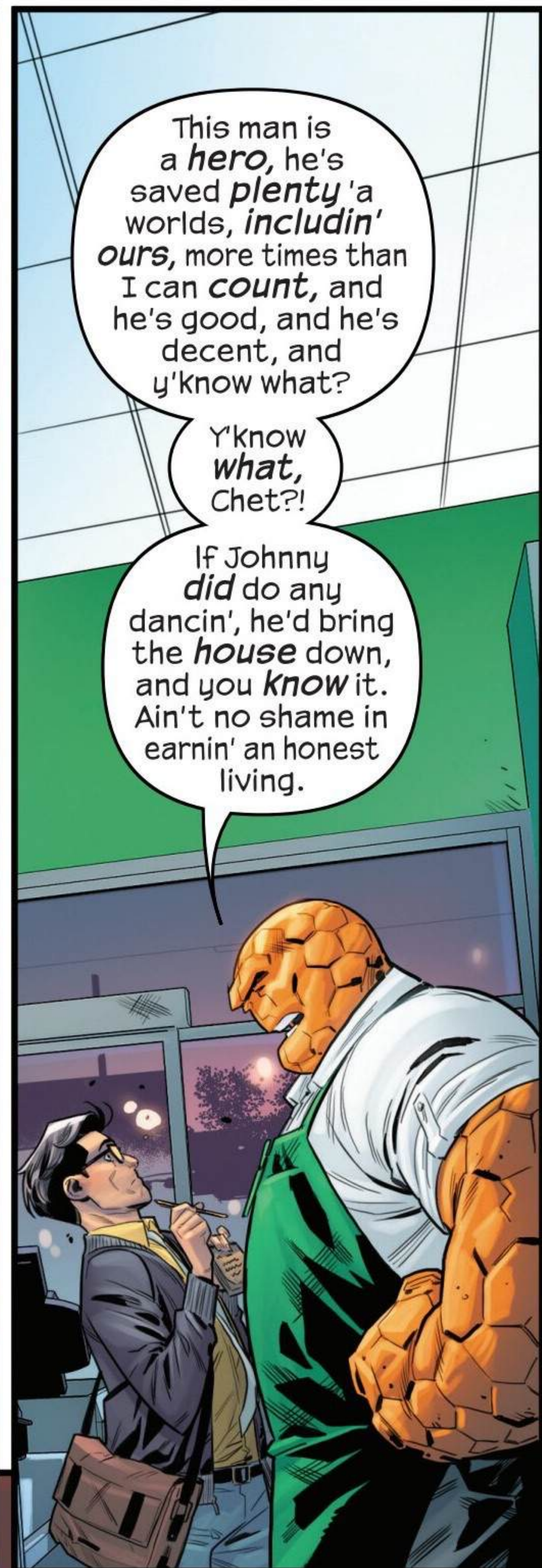
Now you lissen ta me, "Chet." You wanna know about Johnny Storm?

'Cuz I'll tell ya about Johnny Storm.



You're in the presence of one 'a the **best men** I know, the kinda guy who'll give you the shirt off his **back** if he thinks it'll **help**.

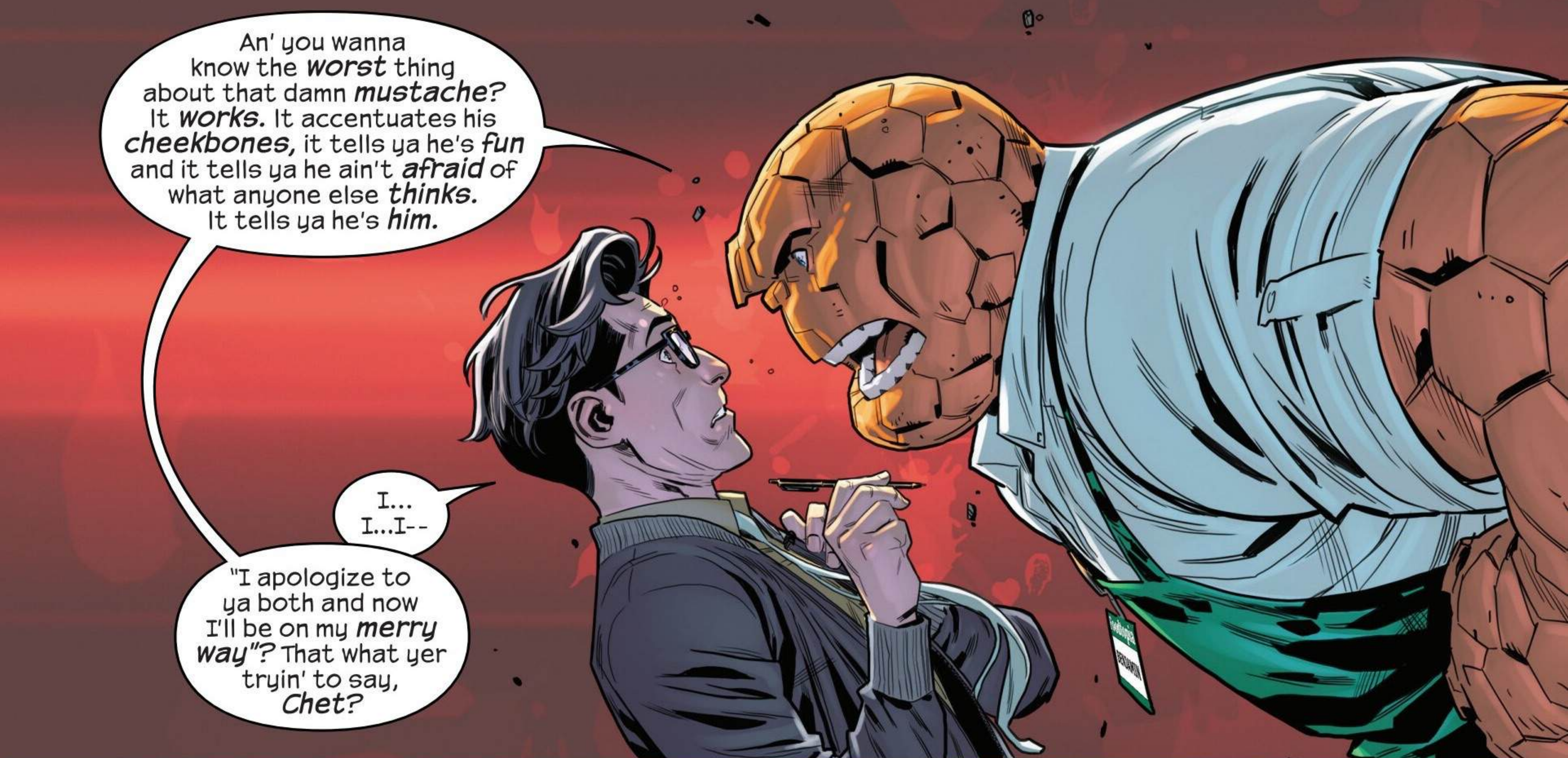
You mockin' him for, what-- **workin'**? Working ta support **two families**, one of which he ain't even **related** to?



This man is a **hero**, he's saved **plenty** 'a worlds, **includin' ours**, more times than I can **count**, and he's good, and he's decent, and y'know what?

Y'know **what**, Chet?!

If Johnny **did** do any dancin', he'd bring the **house** down, and you **know** it. Ain't no shame in earnin' an honest living.



An' you wanna know the **worst** thing about that damn **mustache**? It **works**. It accentuates his **cheekbones**, it tells ya he's **fun** and it tells ya he ain't **afraid** of what anyone else **thinks**. It tells ya he's **him**.

I... I...I--

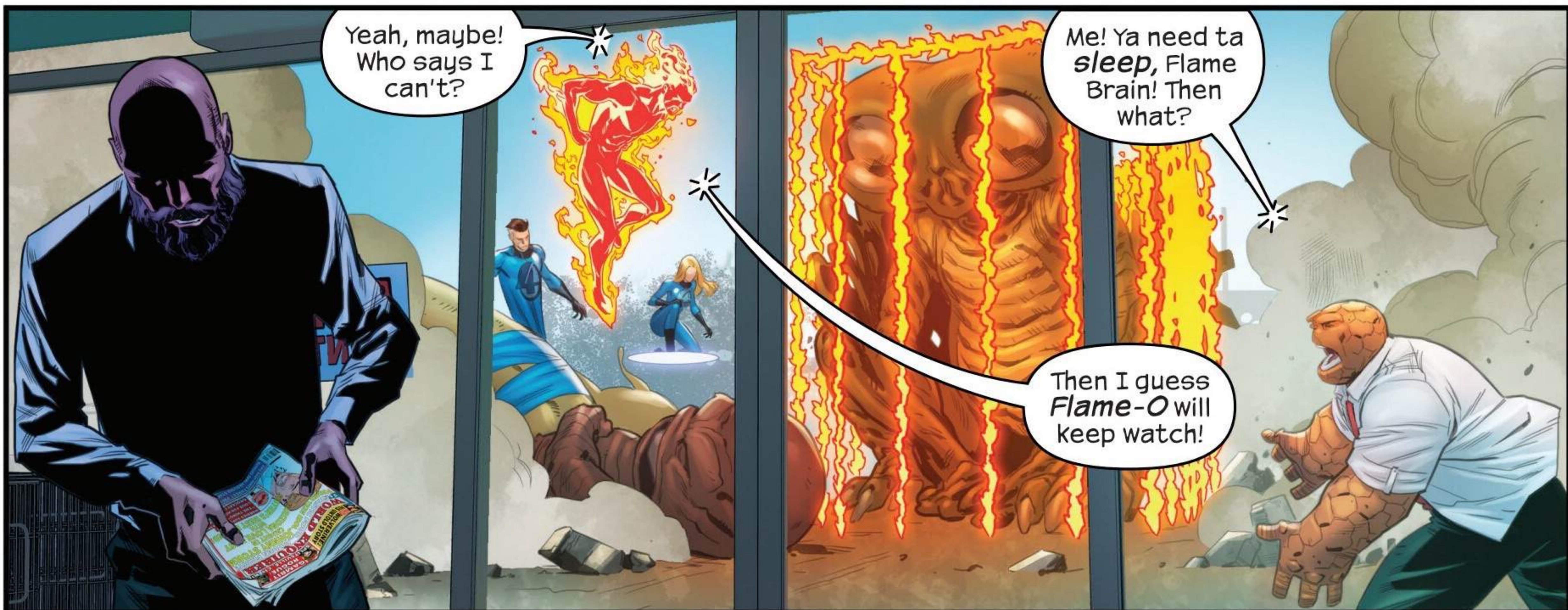
"I apologize to ya both and now I'll be on my **merry way**"? That what yer tryin' to say, **Chet**?



Or maybe you're tryin' ta get out that if ya **ever** have **anything** else ta ask **Johnny** from now on, you'll ask it ta **me** first?

'Cuz I gotta say, bud, fer **yer** sake, I **really** hope that's what it is.







#18 VARIANT BY PHIL NOTO



ARIZONA.

You got
everythin' ya
need, sweet
pea?

It's just a *day trip* to
New York and the Museum
of Modern Art, babe.
We'll be *fine*.

Never thought
you wuz much of a
patron 'a the
arts, Reed.

I'm not, but--it's good
to stretch my horizons
every now and then. And
I need supplies from the
Baxter Building too,
which--

He's
interested
in the
artwork.

The
translation
process,
yes.

They're reproductions of famous
paintings made to touch, yeah?
So blind people can
appreciate 'em too?

Plus new
3-D paintings
by blind artists.
There's a *ton* of
exciting work
happening at the
intersection of
sculpture and
visual art.

Neat! Never saw
you as much of
a museum guy,
Reed.

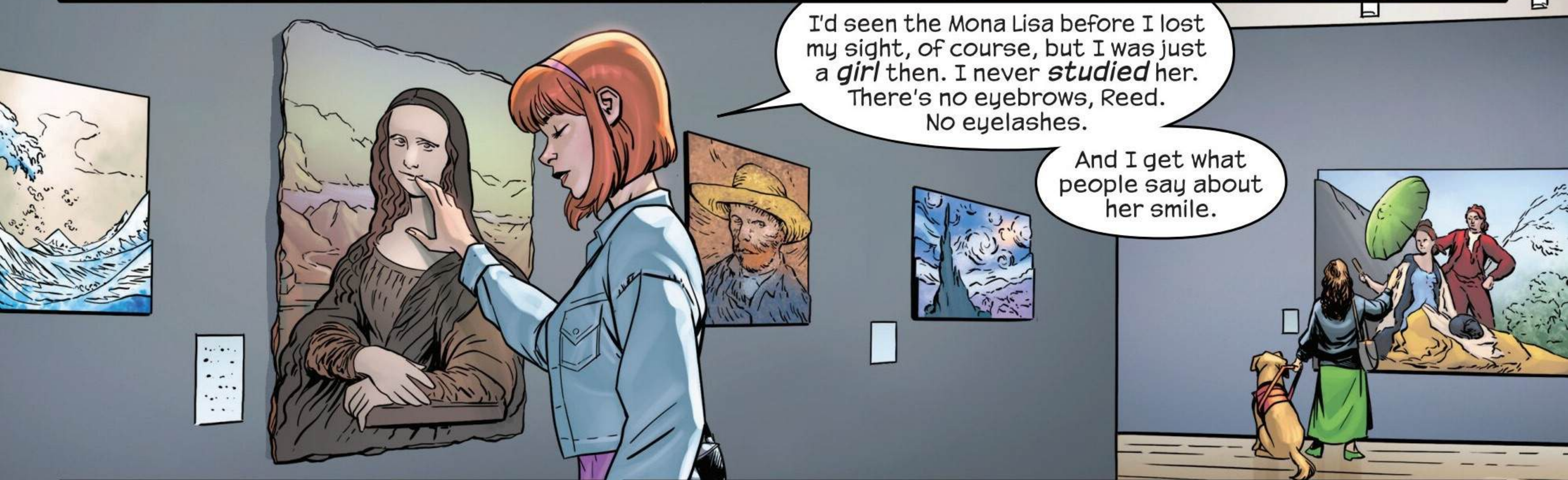
Ben said the
same thing, which
suggests I have work
to do. We'll tell you
all about it
tonight.

Don't be late--
I'm makin' Great-
Great Gramma Grimm's
world-famous hoagies
fer dinner!

Wouldn't
miss it,
babe.

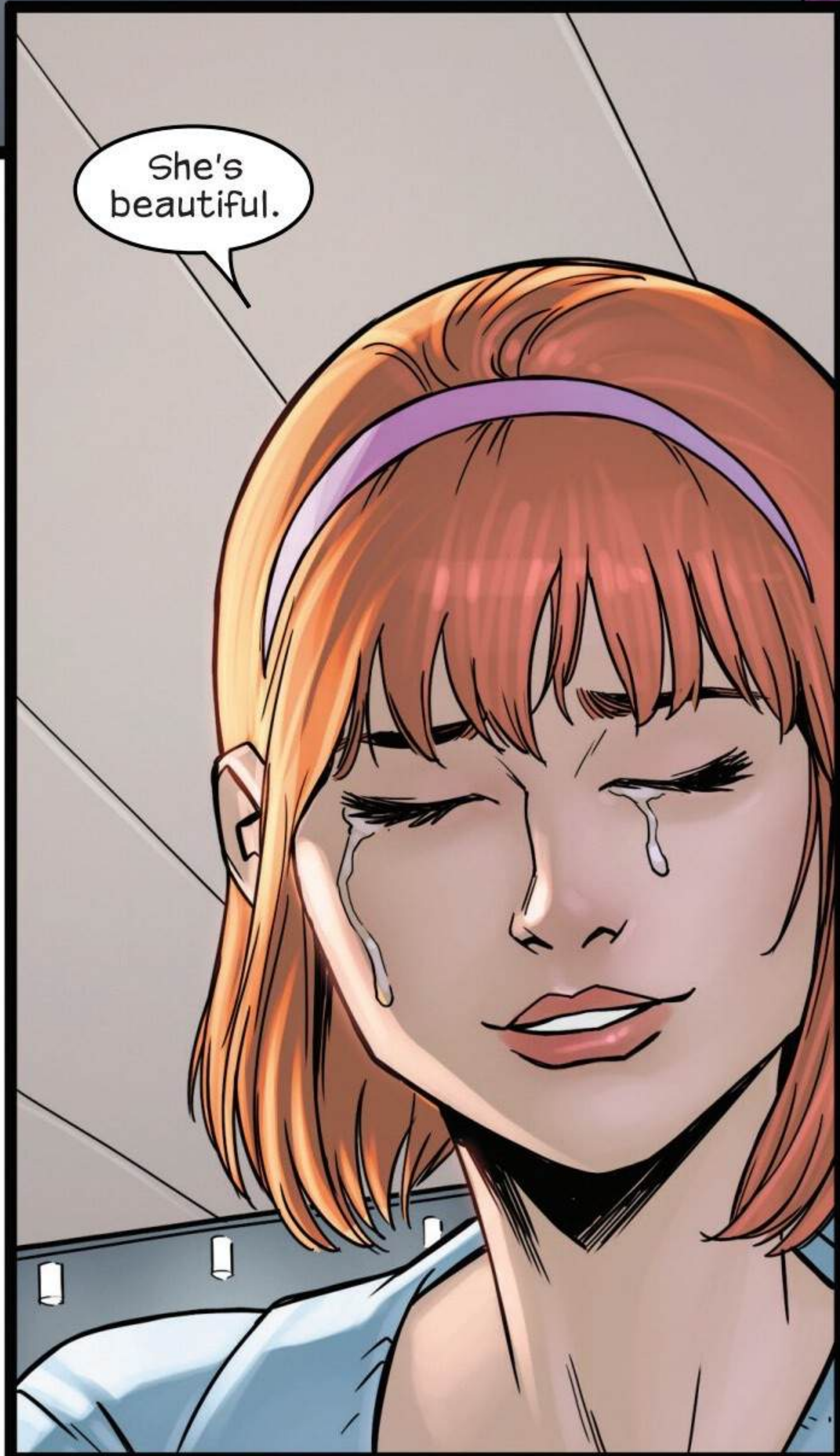
Love you,
Kiss you
and see you
soon.

SVRRRRMMMMMM



I'd seen the Mona Lisa before I lost my sight, of course, but I was just a *girl* then. I never *studied* her. There's no eyebrows, Reed. No eyelashes.

And I get what people say about her smile.



She's beautiful.



One recalls a paper in *Science*, I believe in volume 290, number 5495, that argues her smile is largely rendered in low spatial frequency ranges, which makes it more apparent in peripheral vision than when under direct observation.

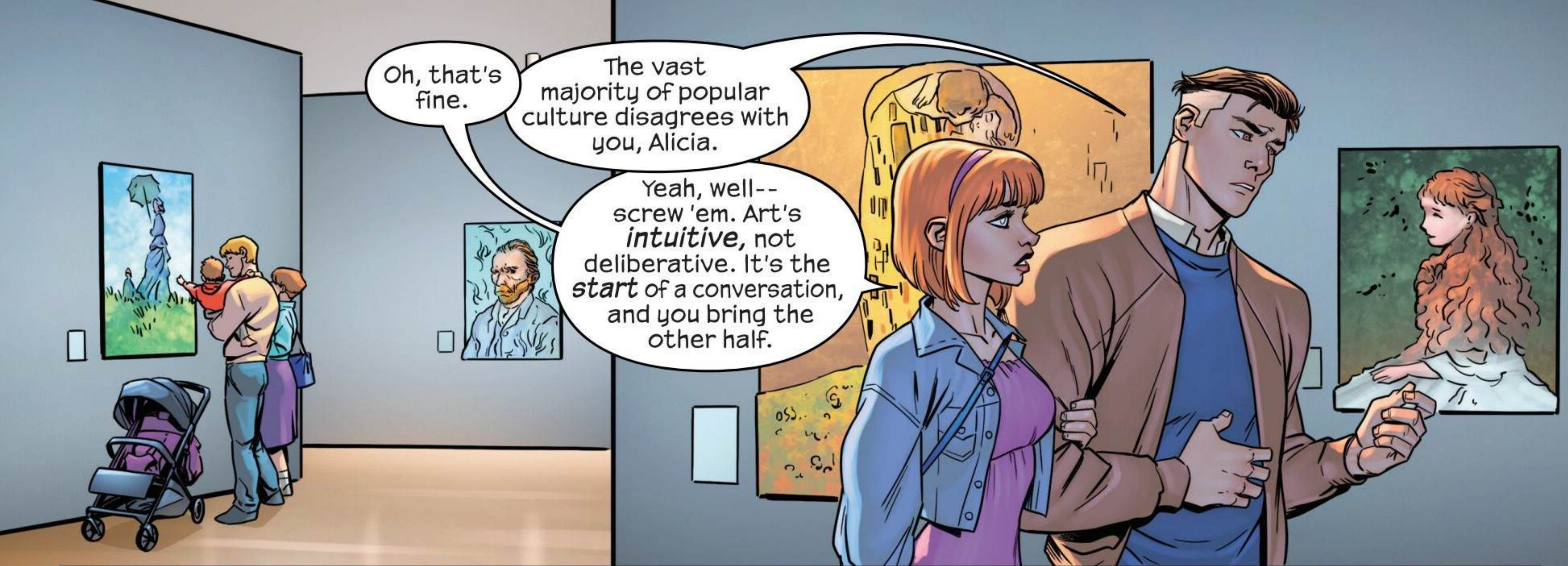
Heh. One does, does he?



I apologize, Alicia. I can understand art--its *intent*, its *purpose*--but I don't *feel* it.

You just stood in front of a great work of art and were moved to *tears*. I've never experienced that.

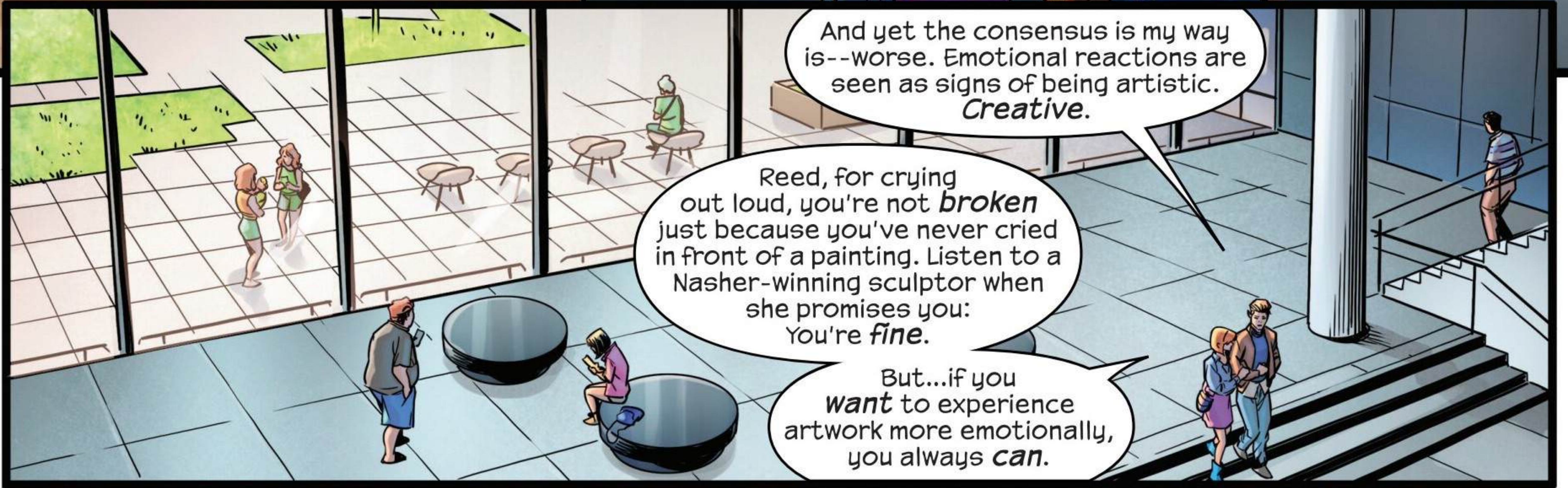
No artwork has provoked *any* sort of emotional reaction in me that even *approaches* that.



Oh, that's fine.

The vast majority of popular culture disagrees with you, Alicia.

Yeah, well-- screw 'em. Art's *intuitive*, not deliberative. It's the *start* of a conversation, and you bring the other half.



And yet the consensus is my way is--worse. Emotional reactions are seen as signs of being artistic. *Creative*.

Reed, for crying out loud, you're not *broken* just because you've never cried in front of a painting. Listen to a Nasher-winning sculptor when she promises you: You're *fine*.

But...if you *want* to experience artwork more emotionally, you always *can*.



Let it *remind* you of things, places, feelings-- use it as a *prompt* for association. Let your mind wander and find emotional connections between what you're *thinking* of and what you're *seeing*.

That sounds... *nondeterministic*.

Heh. That's 'cause it is. It's a surprise, like people are a surprise.

It's magic.



Well, I'm much less comfortable with *magic* than I am with predictable outputs from reliable inputs. But you know what?

I'll give it a try next time we--



That's strange. The sun's gone, Alicia. Everything's in *darkness*.

No.

Yeah, I feel it. Sudden cloud cover?

REED RICHARDS AND
ALICIA MASTERS-GRIMM IN:

"TO CURSE THE DARKNESS!"

No, I
think it's
worse than
that.





There're people running out of the darkness, and they're--they're biting other people!

Like zombies?

No--they're not tearing *flesh*, it's more like they're...*drinking blood*?



Vampires.
Of course.



Vampires are *mythical creatures*, Alicia-- they don't--

Yeah, and you've teamed up with Ghost Rider and *still* say ghosts aren't real. If it *walks* like a vampire and *bites* like a vampire...

Fair. In any case, my flexible skin can't be pierced by *bites*. And if that can protect *me*...



...then it can protect *you* as well!

Appreciate it, but you gotta save the others too!

I assure you, Alicia...



And so:

I only wish we could've saved more.

C'mon, Reed. You did what you could.

And because of that, we've saved dozens who would've otherwise been bitten by the *vampires*.

By individuals exhibiting vampire-like qualities, yes.

And whose bites also seem to produce beings with identical vampire-like qualities.

The power appears to be out, at least in this area. This is madness. An attack of this scale and so sudden--it's *impossible*.

So nothing you haven't dealt with before, then.

Heh.

I appreciate it, Alicia, you keeping my spirits up. But right now, we're at an impasse.

The city is overrun with--we'll call them "vampires" as a convenient shorthand--and with cell service down, we can't even confirm that people outside the museum still *exist*.

On one hand, New York *has* historically attracted an anomalous and statistically significant share of events like this. But on the other hand, we have *no data*.

What's happening here *could* be happening worldwide. And if it is...

...then how are our *families* doing?



We ain't doin' so hot, kids! Stay behind me, yeah?

At least we know vampires really *can't* stand the sun. But that sunlight's getting smaller, Sue!

Thanks, Johnny-- I noticed!



Those clouds have to be Darkforce energy--they're *fighting* me.

It's taking all I have just to make a small section transparent enough to let light through! I'm not *gaining* any ground!



So we're *alone*, surrounded by *vampires* and losing what little *sunlight* we have left.

And I don't think I can hold the Darkforce off for much longer.

Are we gonna die, Daddy?



No, Nicki, we ain't dyin' or UNdyin' or *anything*. If we lose tha *sun*, Susie can always make a force-field around us.

And then-- and I *promise* ya this part--Reed'll think 'a *somethin'*. He always does.



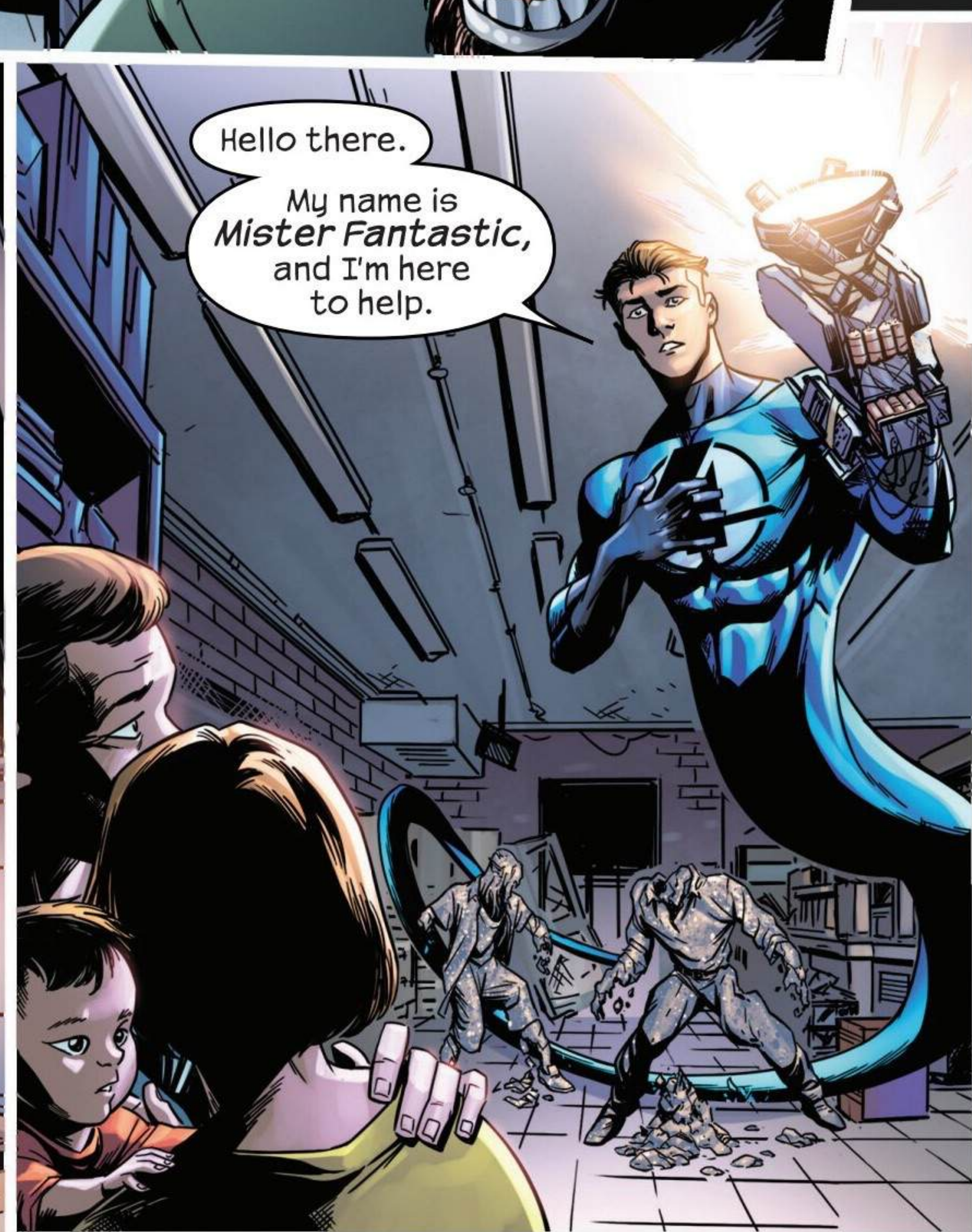
Ungh! Get in closer! I'm losing the *light*!



...
...Reed'll think 'a *somethin'*.



Shortly:





Three more survivors incoming, Alicia. ETA thirty seconds.

Good work. We've got three more teams with ten more survivors heading back too.



I'm bringing them into the building now.

Welcome. You're safe here, and we're going to keep you that way.

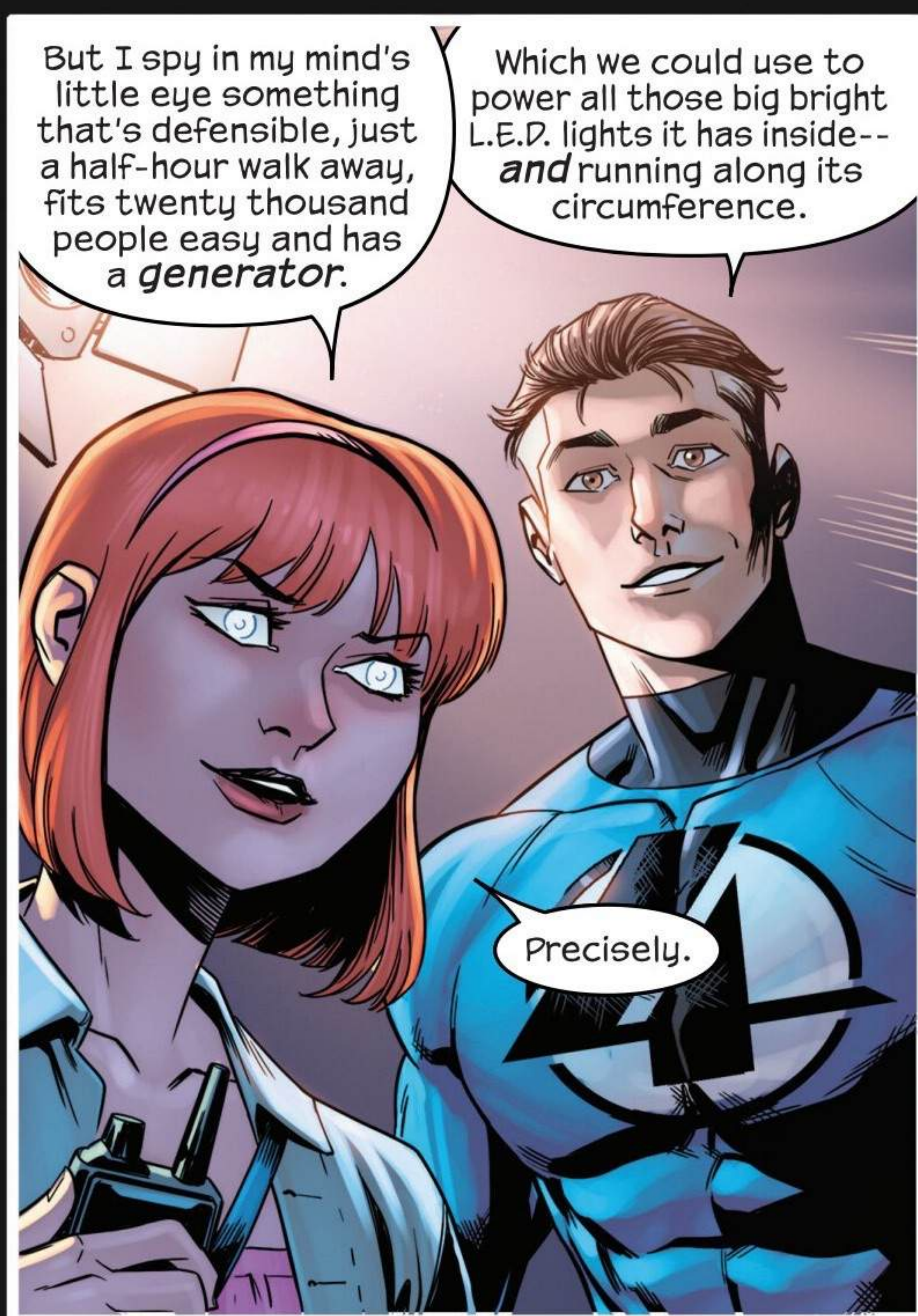
If you know of anyone else out there, let us know and we'll go for them next.



That was a successful run.

You're doing great, Reed, which, ironically, gives us a *new* problem. We need power, we need batteries...

...and very soon, we're also going to need more *space*.



But I spy in my mind's little eye something that's defensible, just a half-hour walk away, fits twenty thousand people easy and has a *generator*.

Which we could use to power all those big bright L.E.D. lights it has inside-- *and* running along its circumference.

Precisely.



Spread the word, and let's get the survivors supplied and ready.

We're moving to *Madison Square Garden*.

And so:

Times Square, Alicia-- we're halfway there.

I believe this is going to *work*.

Told ya it would. How are you holding up?

Suffice it to say I'm glad I won't have to stretch *quite* so far shortly. But even so, the stadium is just a Band-Aid. We still need a *cure*.

A cure for a magical curse that lets you be dead, but also alive, but also gross, but also some people find you really sexy anyway.

You want to solve *vampirism*.

Yes. We have artificial sunlight, obviously, but that's only a cure for vampirism in the sense that a *gun* is a cure for *cancer*. I believe we can *save* the newly infected, help them *recover*.

I can *fix* what I can *understand*, but a *magical blood curse*...

...it doesn't make *sense*. I can't understand it, because it doesn't *fit in* with the rest of my knowledge.

Everything I know says it's *impossible*. How can one bite possibly *accomplish* what it does and so *quickly*? What are the *rules* that *we* need to operate under?

Well then, I have some good news, Mr. Fantastic--you *already* know the rules. They're the same as they always were.

Do good. Save everyone.

And make sure you leave the universe a brighter place than you found it.



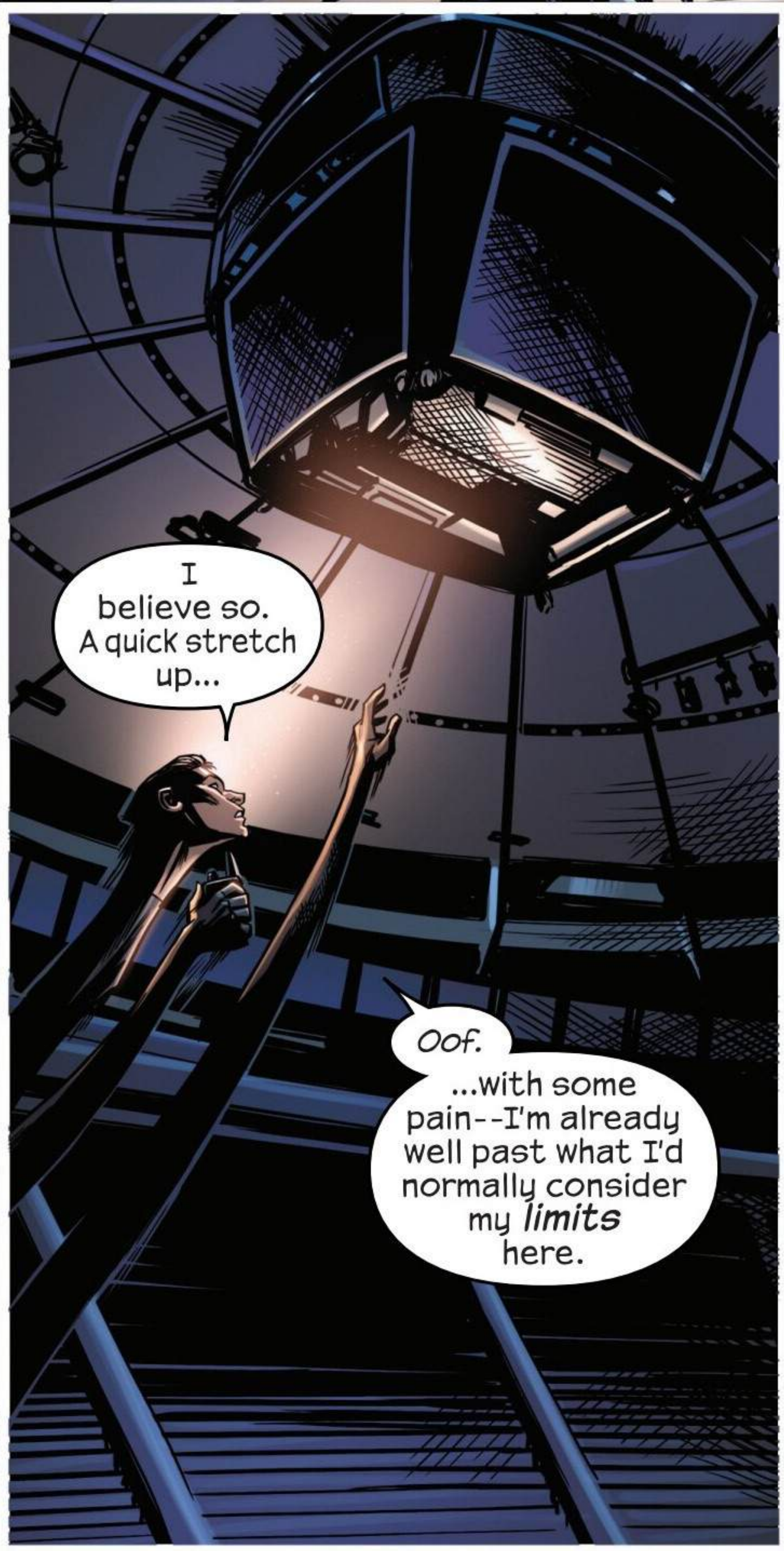
I've got both exterior and interior lights modified, and the generator's running...

...but the system's still offline. *Hrm.*



Of course. The wires must lead to a control room in the suspension-roof utility space.

Can you reach them?



I believe so. A quick stretch up...

Oof.
...with some pain--I'm already well past what I'd normally consider my *limits* here.



And all we need is to flip a *switch*...

ka-CHUNK



...Alicia Masters-Grimm...

...I believe we have ourselves a *fortress of light*.

CHOOOOOM!

That night:

Reed?
Are you
awake?

I am. It's remarkable--the
unprecedented stretching today
was such that my usual form feels
like a *panacea*, but I'm *still* having
trouble falling asleep.

If it was *just* New York that was
attacked, we'd have *heard*
something by now. There'd
be a *rescue*.

My thoughts have
been evolving along similar
lines. Given the atmospheric
changes, this may
be *worldwide*.

Reed...

Same. But--
this is the first chance
I've really had to *think* since
this whole thing started. To
process. Process all that's
happened...

...do you think
our children
are dead?

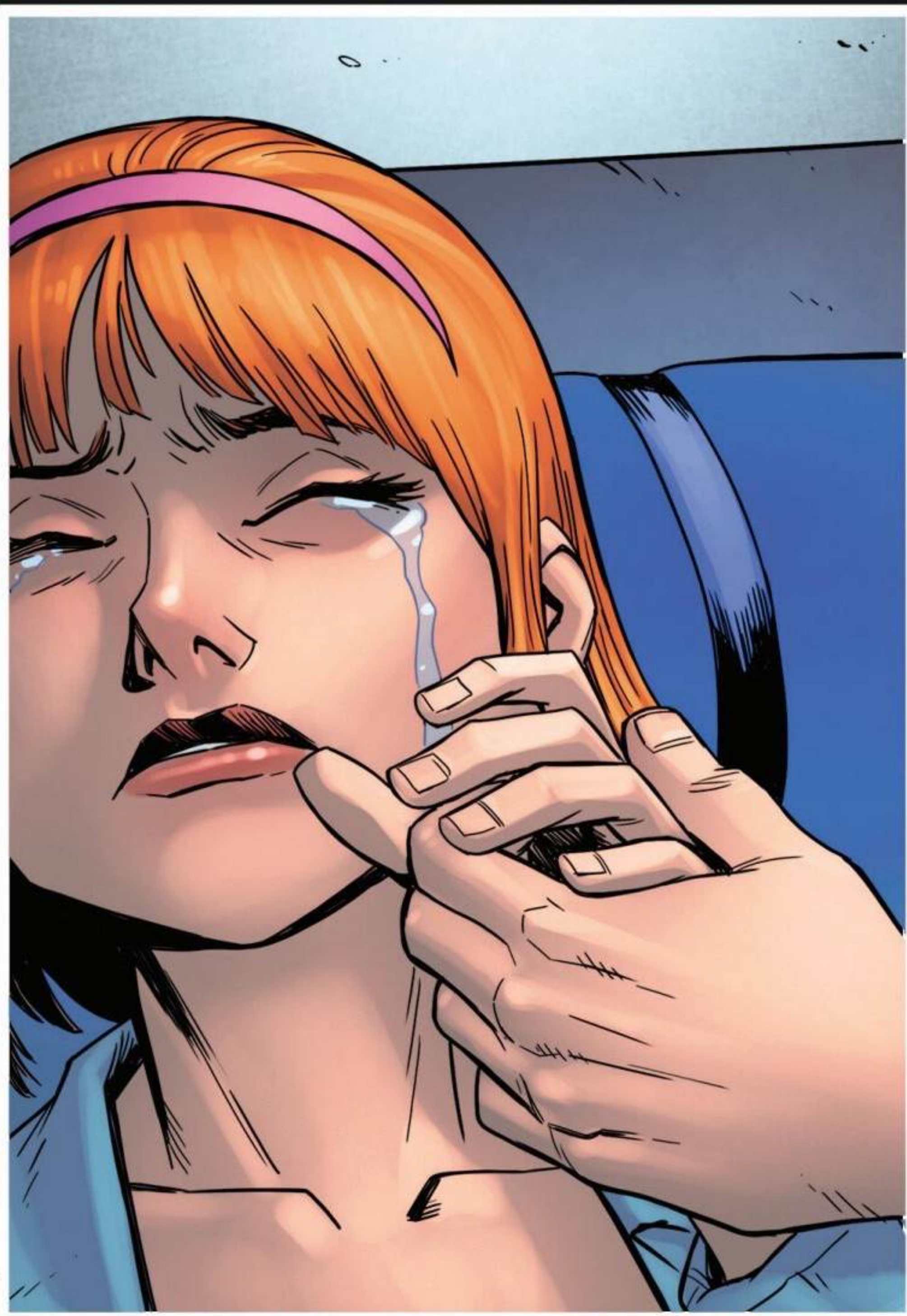
Ben will be fine--
nobody's biting through *his*
skin. And Sue has her *force-*
fields, and Johnny has his
fire, but--

--but
our kids are
just kids.

They're
just--

They're just
kids, and they haven't
done anything, and we
just got them *back*,
and they--

--they--



I don't know, Alicia. That's my honest answer. I calculate a 47.5% chance they're fine and a 47.5% chance they're not.

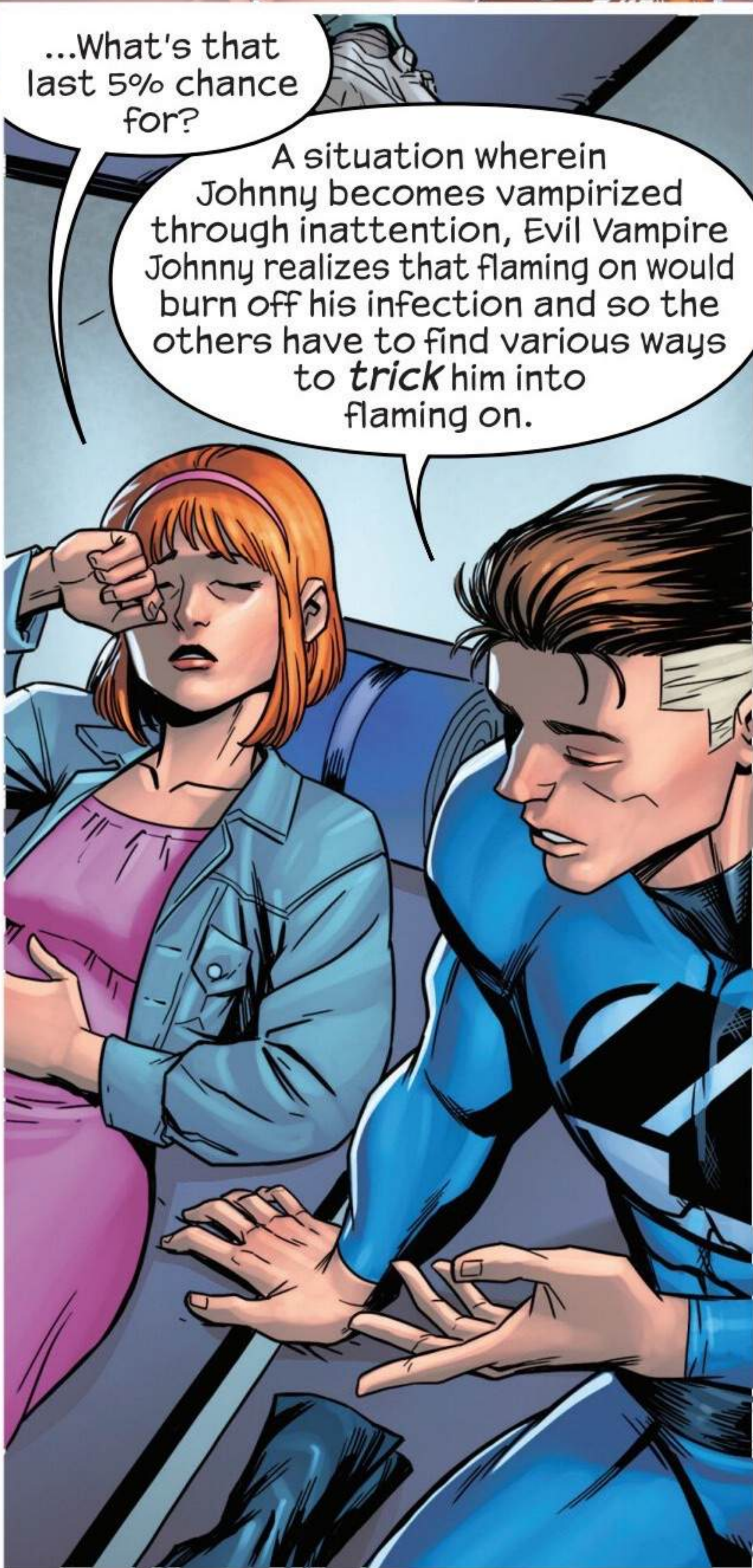
But I also calculate a 100% chance that Ben, Sue and Johnny are moving heaven and earth to *protect* them.



I know. I know.

Thank you, Reed. For-- reminding me. It means a lot.

You're welcome.



...What's that last 5% chance for?

A situation wherein Johnny becomes vampirized through inattention, Evil Vampire Johnny realizes that flaming on would burn off his infection and so the others have to find various ways to *trick* him into flaming on.



Heh. Y'ask me, that should be closer to 20%.

I'll reevaluate my probabilities.

Good night, Reed.

Good night, Alicia.





Do it. *Do it*.
I want to feed.
I *have* to feed.

I
can *smell*
them.



So many
warm bodies
filled with *hot*
blood. So
many.

The light
will burn us.
We'll *die*.

Some of
us will.

ALL of us
WON'T!!



ARRRGHHH!!

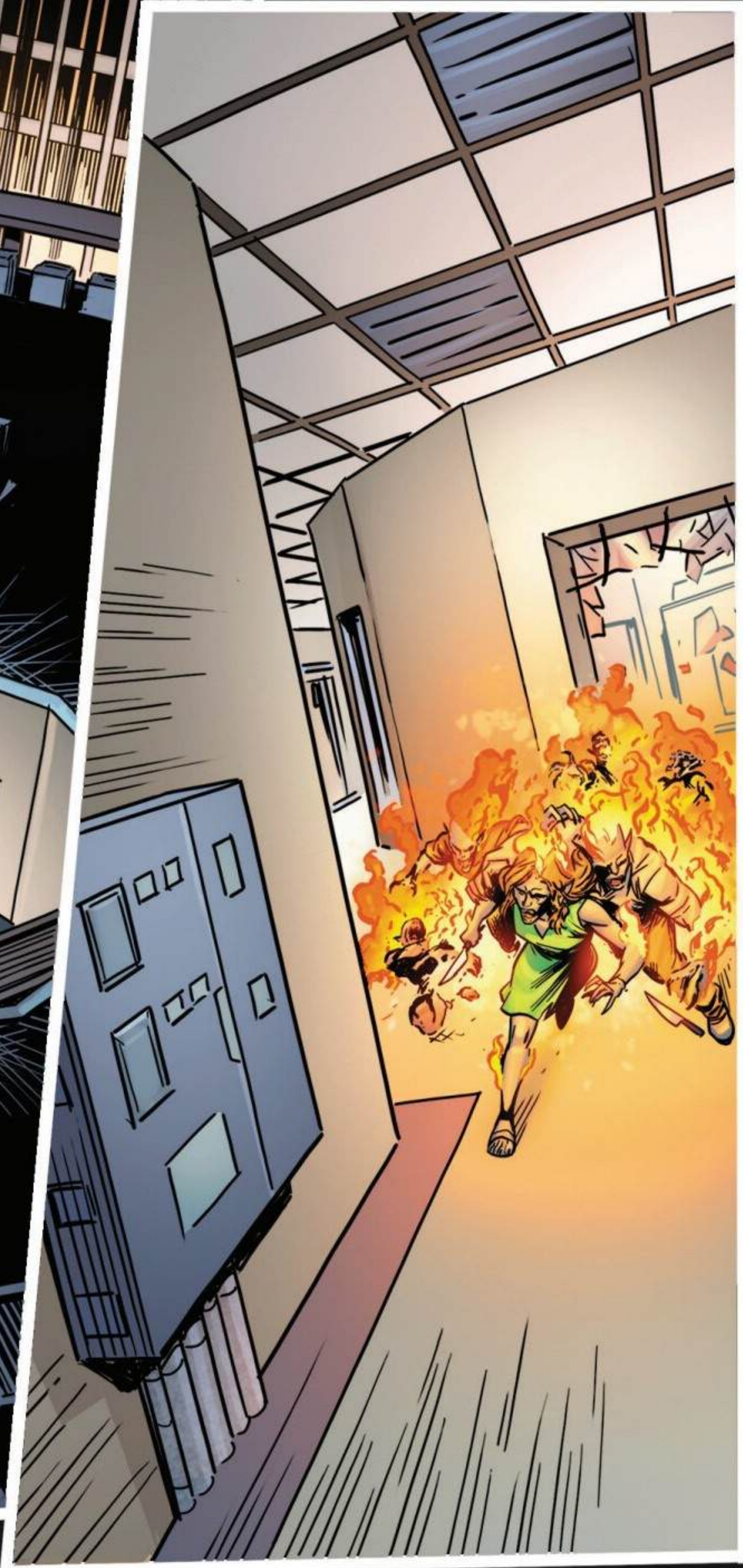


AGGGHHH!!

ANHGH!!



Through the doors!
In! In!



AUUUGH!



ARRRGH!!



AGGGH~



CHHRRRRMMMM...



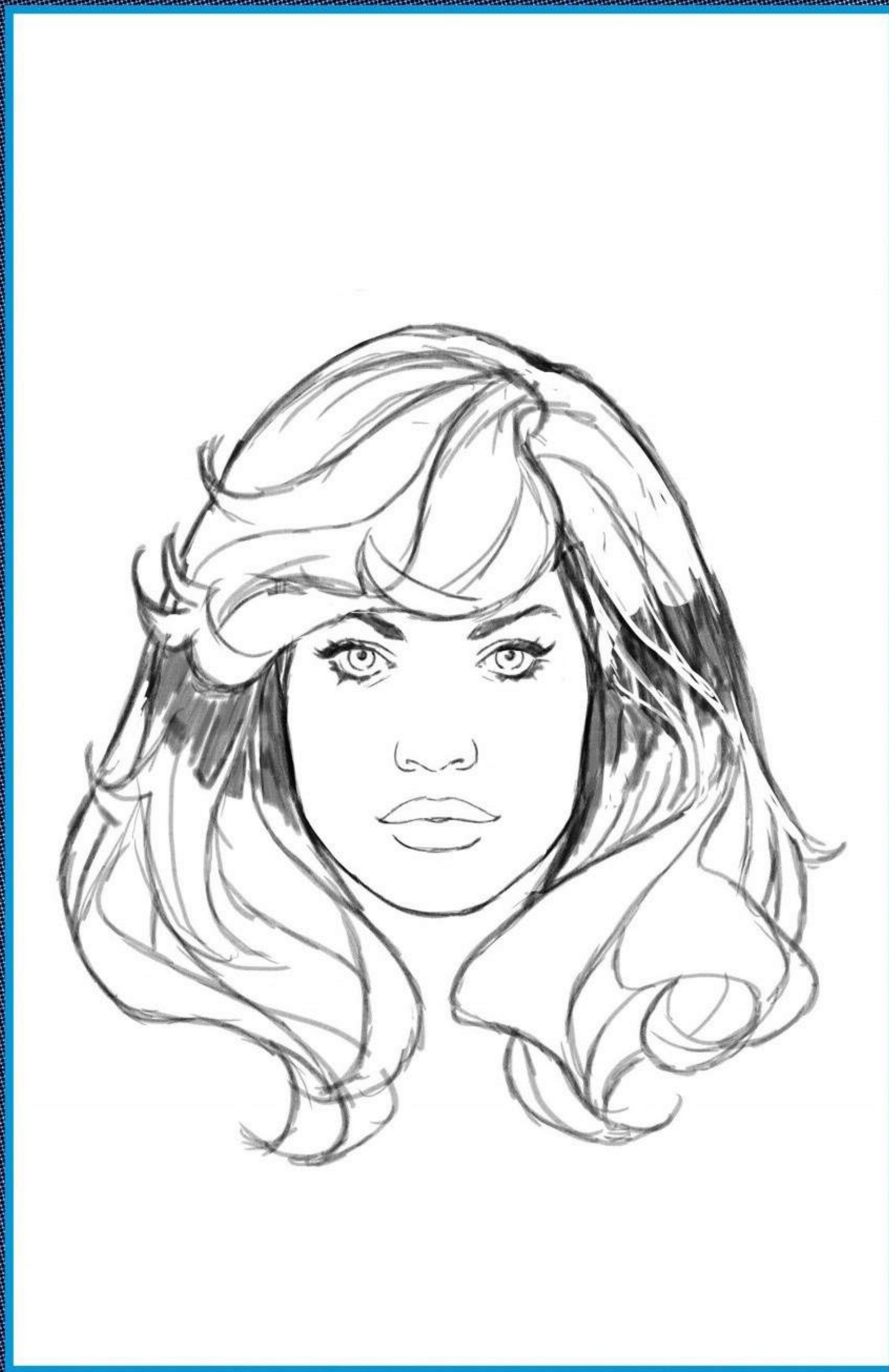
Feed!

Feed!

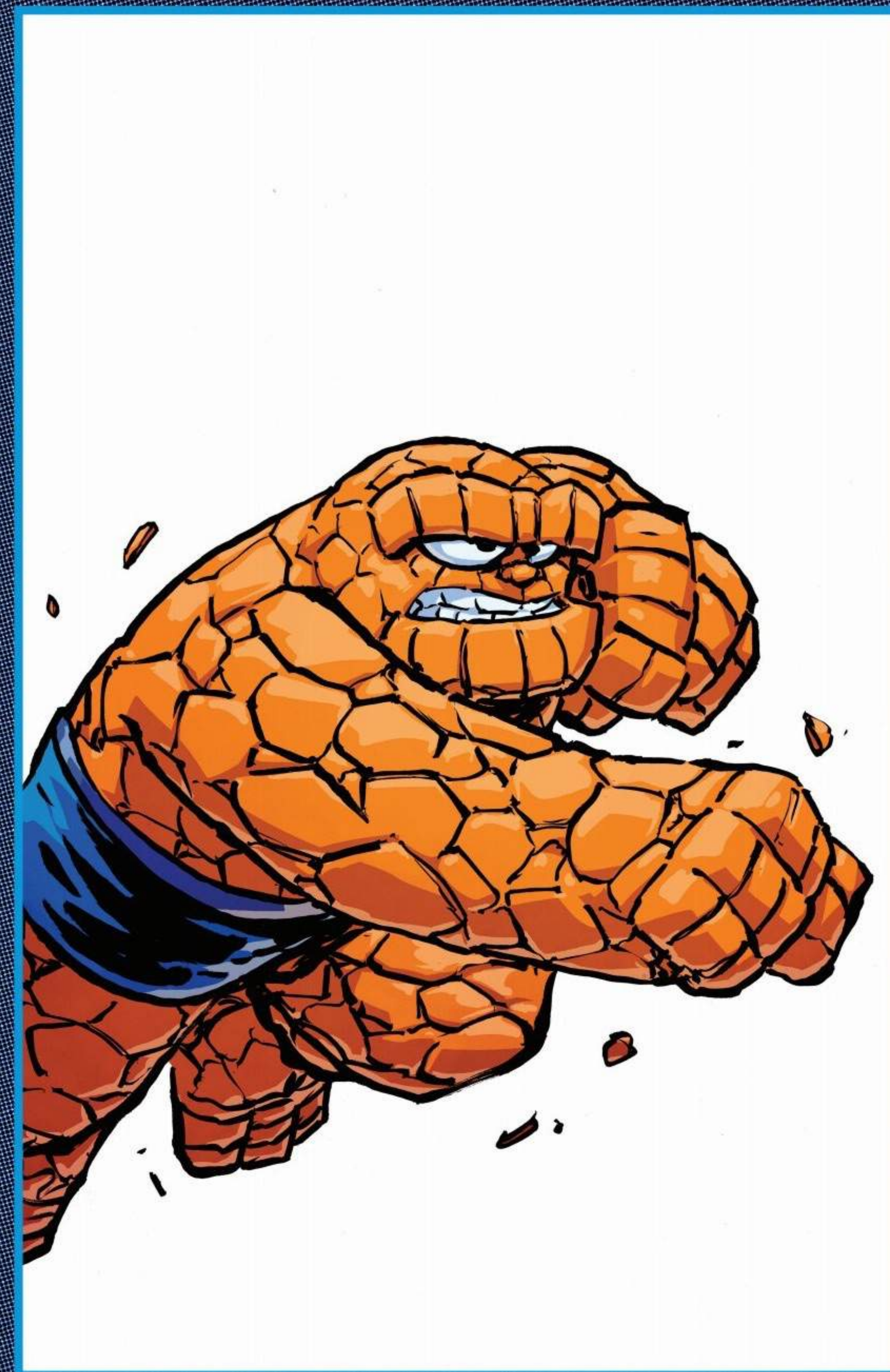
FEEEEED!!!



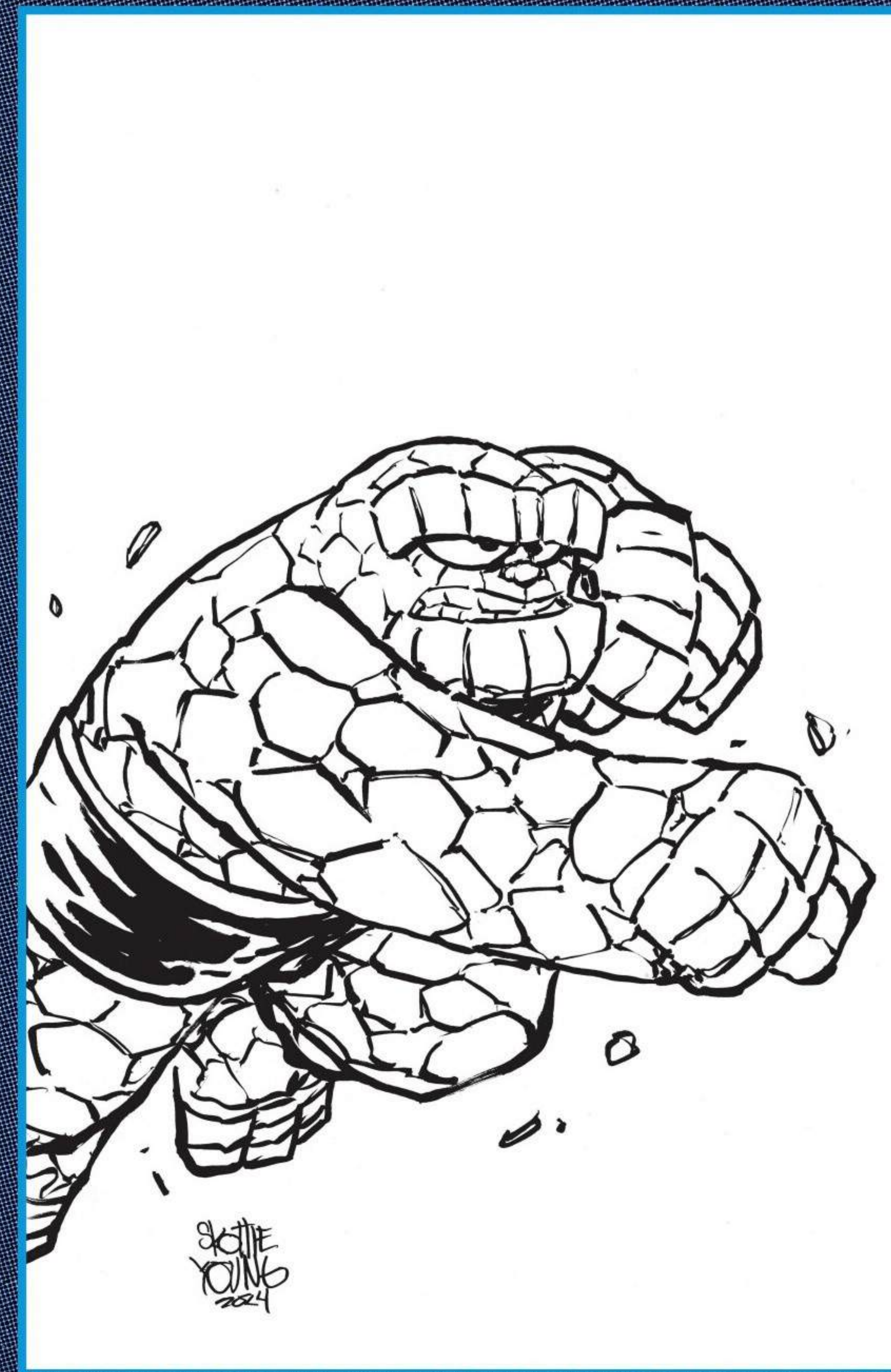
#18 HEADSHOT VARIANT
BY MARK BROOKS



#18 HEADSHOT SKETCH VARIANT
BY MARK BROOKS

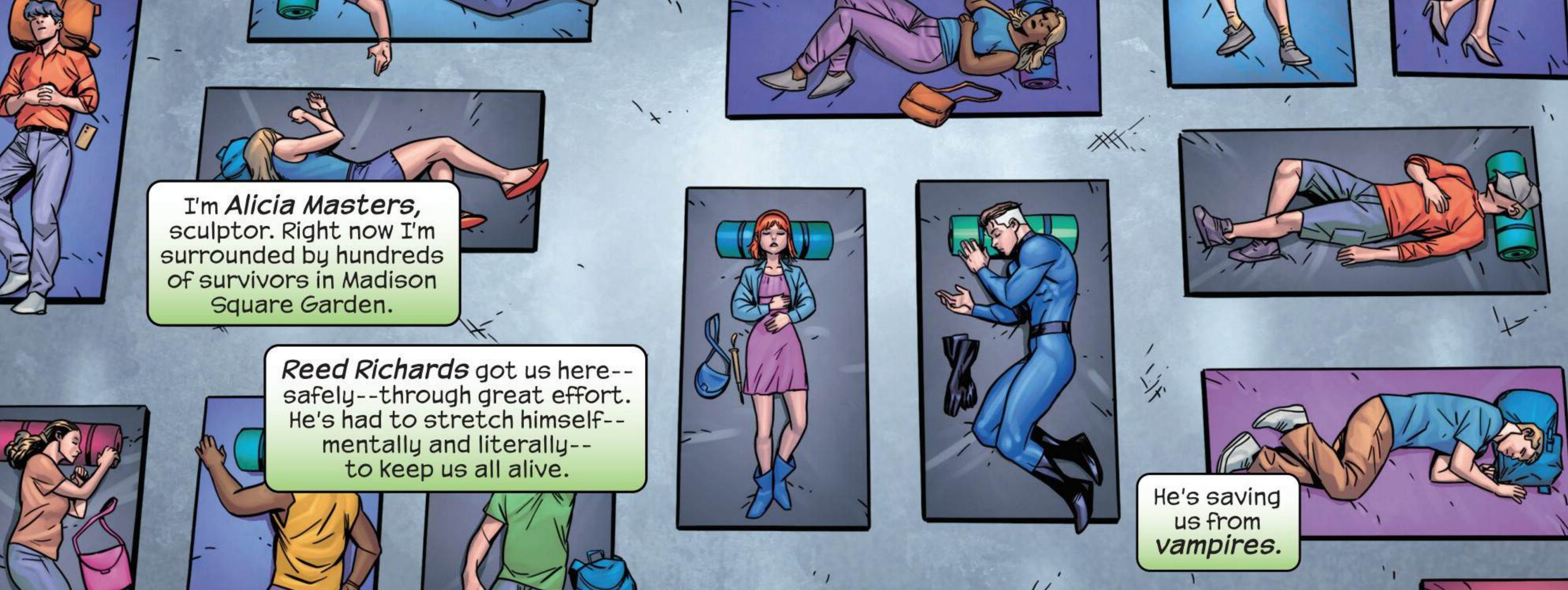


#21 BIG MARVEL VARIANT
BY SKOTTIE YOUNG



#21 BIG MARVEL BLACK & WHITE VARIANT
BY SKOTTIE YOUNG

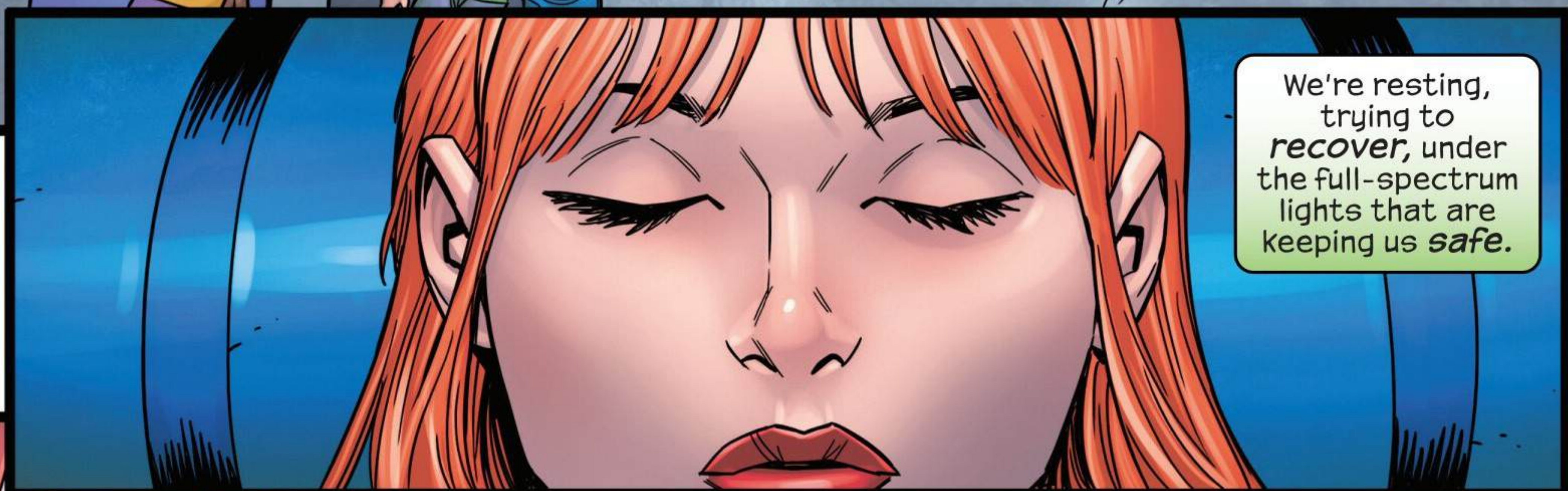




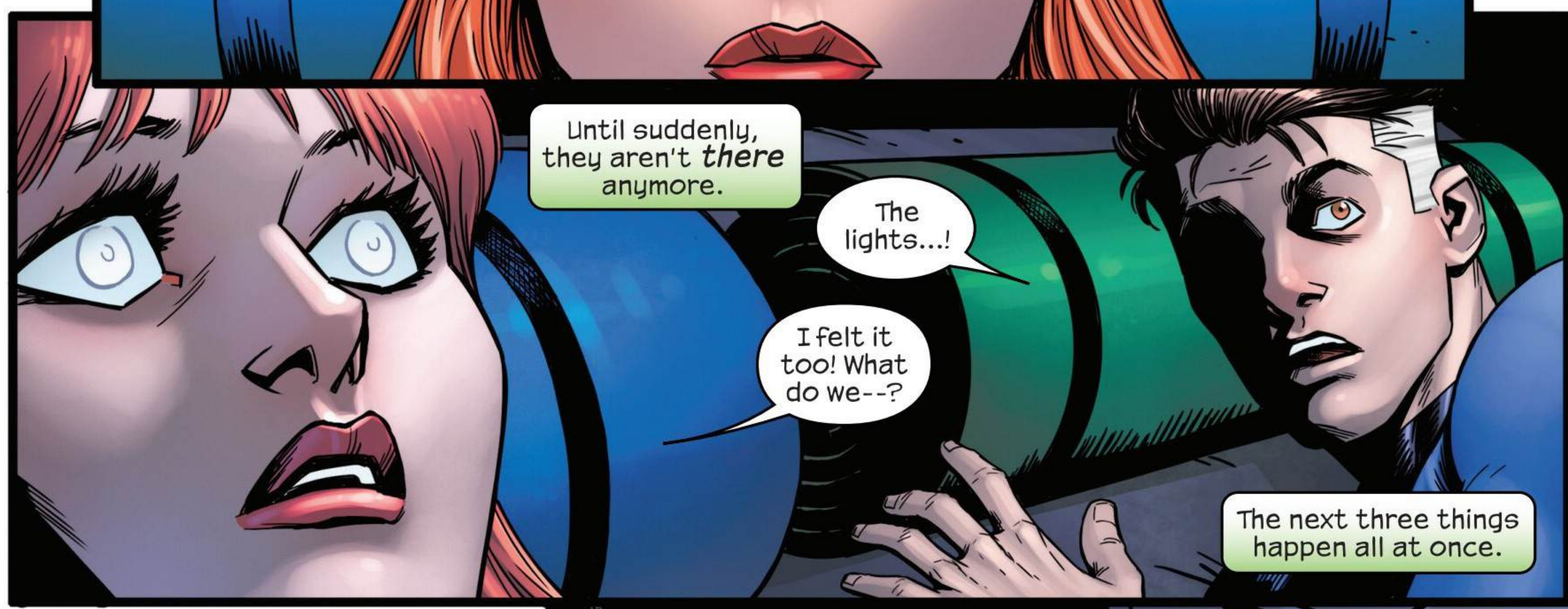
I'm *Alicia Masters*, sculptor. Right now I'm surrounded by hundreds of survivors in Madison Square Garden.

Reed Richards got us here-- safely--through great effort. He's had to stretch himself-- mentally and literally-- to keep us all alive.

He's saving us from *vampires*.



We're resting, trying to *recover*, under the full-spectrum lights that are keeping us *safe*.



Until suddenly, they aren't *there* anymore.

The lights...!

I felt it too! What do we--?

The next three things happen all at once.



I hear *doors* being *forced* at the entrance.

I hear *breaking glass* above us.

It's the sound of bone-deep *fatigue*.

And I hear a small, shuddering sigh from Reed. It's so quiet I don't think he even realizes he *made* the noise.

The man needs rest. Even *Mister Fantastic* can't do this again.

But he must.

And so he
does.

Everyone!
Stay--

ARRGH!

--stay
beneath
me!!

FWOOOOOONK

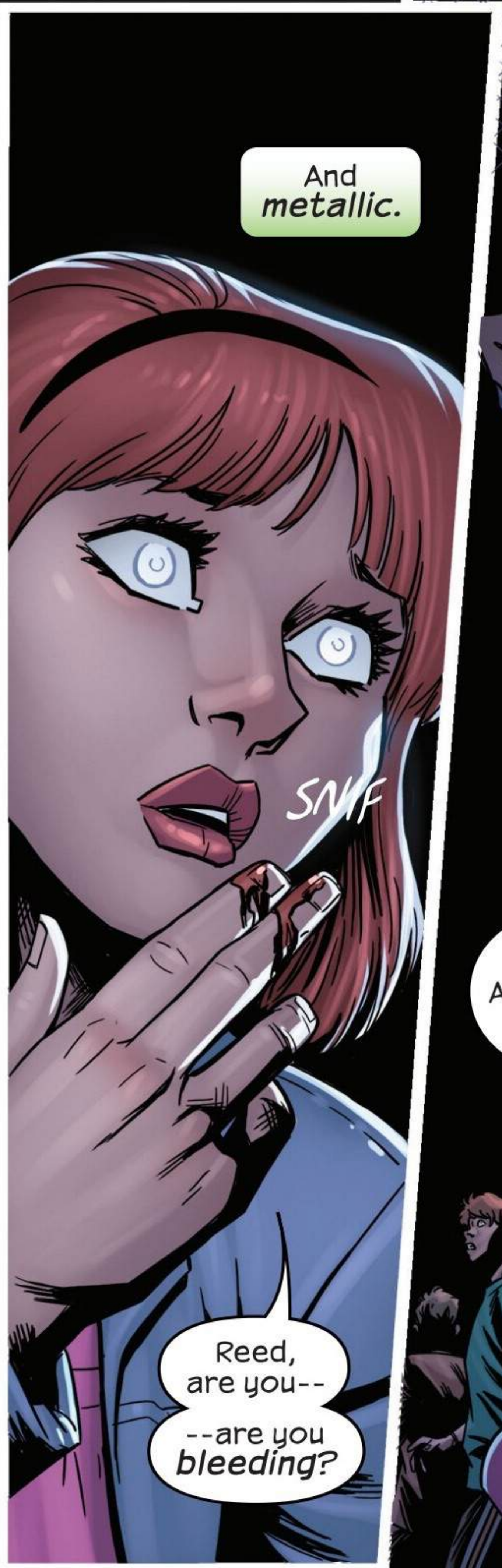
He stretches out,
covering us like a *roof*.
He gives everything
he has and then
keeps going.

Like Ben and Sue and
Johnny and everyone
else who's ever been
a member of the
Fantastic Four...

...Reed Richards
does what he can.



I get up quickly, but as I do, my hand touches something **wet--and warm.**



And **metallic.**

Reed,
are you--
--are you **bleeding?**



That emergency stretch--**tore** me, Alicia. But that's--**ooof--** that's the least of our worries.

I'm keeping my wound **inside** to protect it from vampiric infection.



Where do we go? The basement?



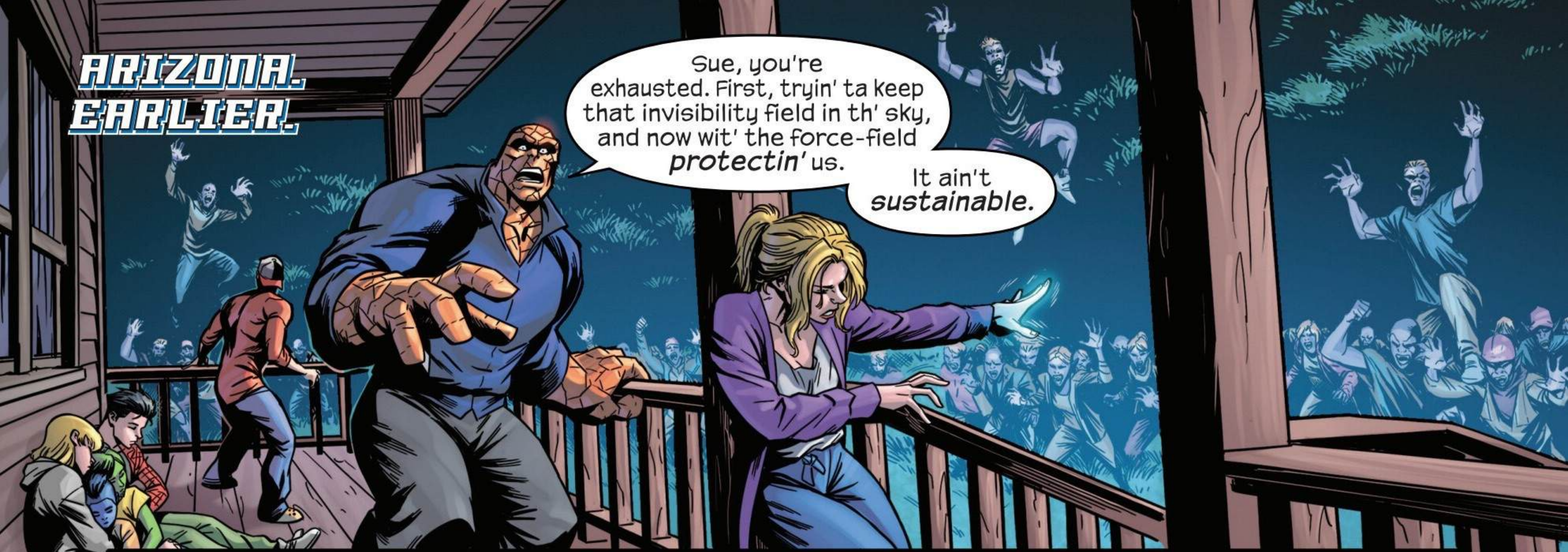
It's the only option **left**. And it's where the generator is.

But we have to move **now...**



...or, very soon, we won't be able to move at all!

ARIZONA.
EARLIER.



Sue, you're exhausted. First, tryin' ta keep that invisibility field in th' sky, and now wit' the force-field protectin' us.

It ain't sustainable.



I just won't sleep, Ben I'll stay awake.

Don't let me fall asleep.

Yer only human, Sue, which means yer gonna fall asleep eventually, whether ya want to or not. And when ya do...

I got an idea.



Maybe this is stupid, but, like--I *do* make light. Who says I can't make light like how the sun does?

Full-spectrum solar radiation.

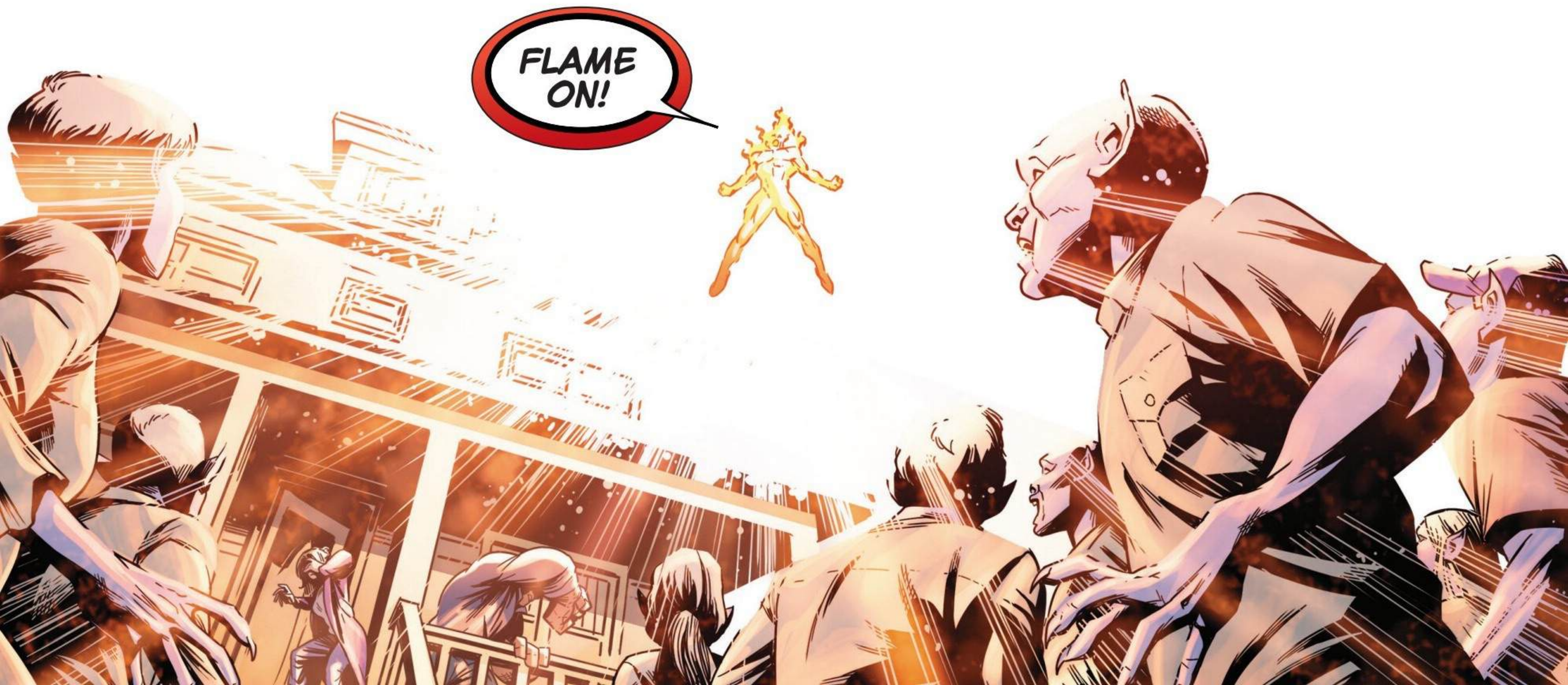
Yeah, UV and everything else! That'd do it, right? That's something I could do to fight vampires?



I mean--mebbe. But how are ya gonna know when yer makin' the right kinda light, Johnny? Ain't there *spectrographs* an' whatnot ya gotta know?

Nah. See, I'll know I've got it right when *they* run from it.

FLAME ON!





That's not it...

...No, that's not it either...

...Okay, how about--?



Aha!

Try to feed on *my* family, eh, vampires? How's that workin' out for you, huh?!

Sun's out, guns out, jerks!!



I got night watch, Sis! The rest of you go sleep, and we'll trade places in the morning!

Go on-- I *got* this, promise!



Human Torch, baby.

Flame on.



Reed has to get smaller, or that tear is going to get bigger. He contracts, pressing us together...

...but keeping us *safe*.

We move-- and are moved-- down to the basement.

I can't help but think that Reed's blood, left behind us, buys us a little time.

He stretches himself once more--*expanding* to fill the space, to make sure there're no vampires in here with us.

He ensures there's no way in, that every steel door down here is *secure*.

His wounds tear *bigger*.

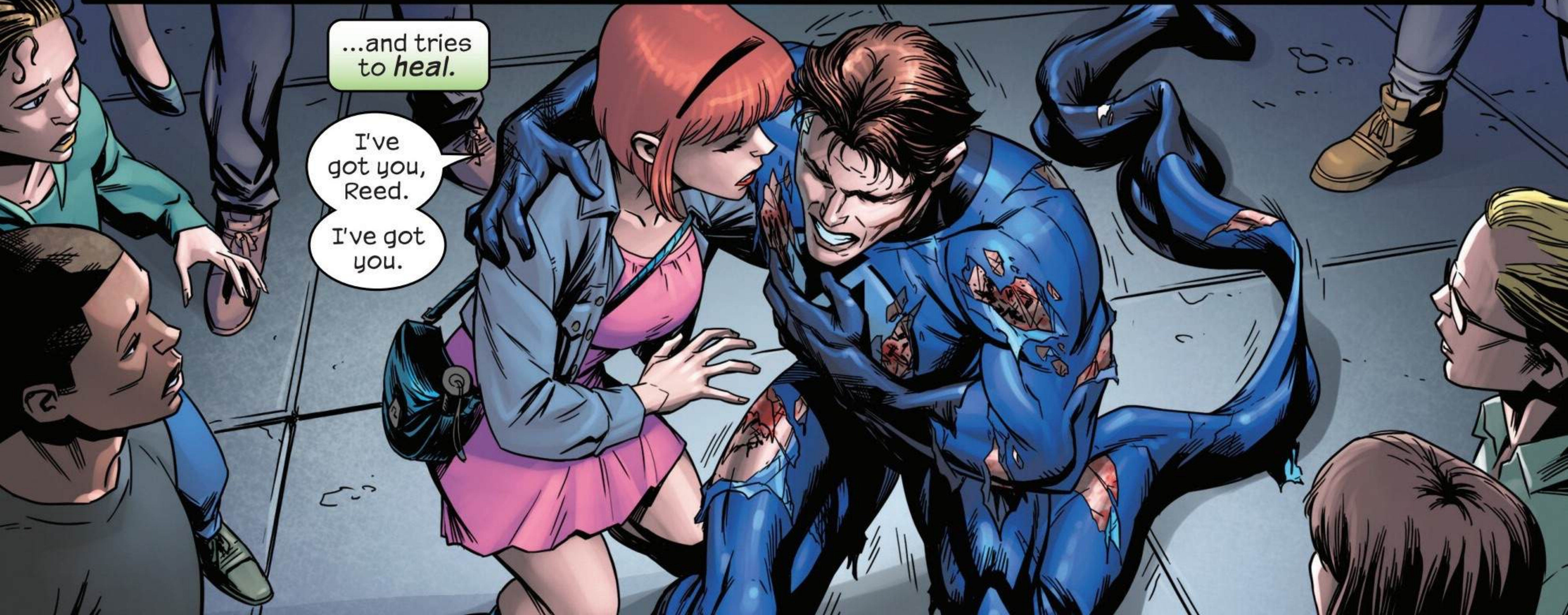


And then he retreats, becomes himself again...

Alicia...

...and tries to *heal*.

I've got you, Reed.
I've got you.





Is anyone here a *doctor*?!

Please, he needs a doctor!



Um, I'm a third-year med student. My name's Priya.

He's injured, Priya. There's a tear...

I can see that. Does this, um, normally happen when he stretches?



Normally--don't need to go so far, so fast. Normally give myself more time.

Had to--

Okay, relax, save your strength, Mr. Fantastic. Uh, Mr. Richards.

Mr. Fantastic.



"Reed"... is fine...

I can stitch him together, but I'm going to need tools.

If Sue were here, she'd **form** them with force-fields. If Johnny were here, he'd **sterilize** anything we found.

And Ben...



Ben would help to **find** the blamed things--just like I can.

Okay, everyone, listen up! We need **scissors** and **thread** and **boiling water**.

The lights may be gone, but we still have **power**. We've got a whole **stadium basement** to search, and Reed Richards is counting on us.

Move, move, move!

ARIZONA.
EARLIER.

Well, we ain't
stayin' here an' waitin'
ta be *vampire chow*.
All aboard, kids. We're
off ta find *help*--
an' *be* help,
if we can.

The first stop is the
neighbors. Gracie and her
husband have a root cellar
under their house.

If they made
it there in
time...

...then
we can
help.

REED:
CAN'T KEEP DARKFORCE INVISIBLE OR
HOLD IT BACK WITH FORCE-FIELDS
JOHNNY'S FLAMES KEEP VAMPIRES AWAY
WENT TO HELP OTHERS
FIND US





Thank you, Miss Raju.

Hey, thank *you* for saving our lives. You got any ideas how to *fix* this?

I'm-- working on it.



You sound improved, Reed.

Indeed. The stitches help keep the flesh in place...

...which lets *me* focus on knitting myself back together. It's like stretching into myself...



And let me guess: Now that you're not in danger of *bleeding out*, you want to focus on solving vampirism again.

I *have* to, Alicia. I need to come up with a way to arrest and reverse magical vampiric infection, and if I can't...

...well, people are going to *die*.



But you're realizing you're at the same *impasse* you were before. It doesn't matter if you're the smartest guy on the planet or the stupidest guy in the room.

You can't *solve* what doesn't make *sense*, and magic is *irrational*. It breaks the rules of the universe.



That's--a remarkably astute summation, Alicia. My entire foundation of knowledge is useless: It simply doesn't *apply* here. And thus...

...I've *lost* before I've even *started*.



That's not what I meant. Look--I want to tell you a story, Reed.

I prefer direct statements to metaphorical narratives with arguably oblique moral lessons.



Heh. Okay, I want to tell you a direct statement, Reed. Stop trying to *cure vampirism*.

Pardon?

You don't understand magic, yet you're trying to undo one of its oldest and most enduring curses!



You're a caveman, trying to build a rocket ship out of *sticks* and *stones*.

You're demanding too much of yourself! Stop shooting for the moon and instead shoot for something you can use *today*.

Baby steps, you know?



Right. Build up a *new* science--one based on tested and repeatable properties of *magic*, if indeed there are *any*...

...and see what we can fix with *that*.

Exactly! We don't need a rocket ship right now--we just need *help*. *Any* help.



And there's no one on Earth who, I believe, is better equipped to *provide* it.

You're smart, you're creative, you're motivated and there's got to be a stadium's worth of *technology* down here.

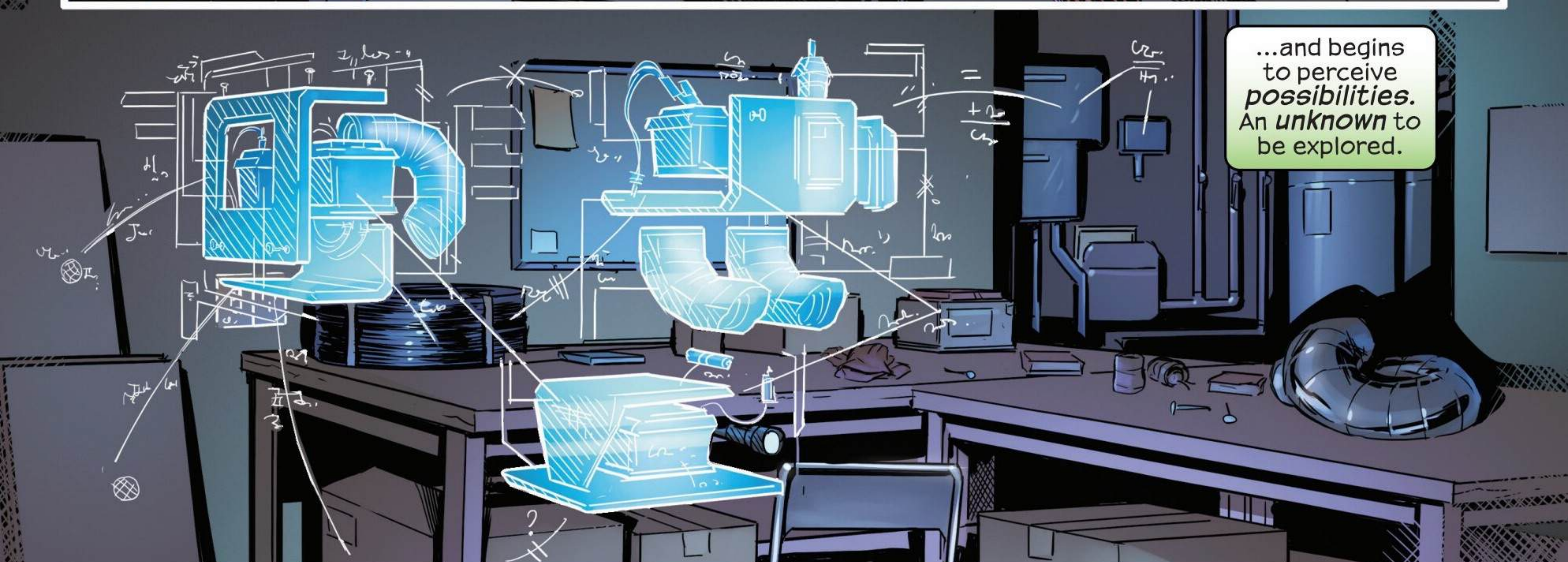


Go make some *magic*, Mr. Fantastic.

And in this darkened room, Reed takes in what supplies he has...



...and begins to perceive *possibilities*. An *unknown* to be explored.



And so the smartest man in the world begins to *work*.



You know, Alicia, if you weren't such a great sculptor, I'd say you missed your true calling as a *motivational speaker*.

Oh, I'm actually great at many things, thank you very much.



ARIZONA!



That's right! *Any* of you lurking in the shadows, you better listen up: These people are protected by the *Fantastic Four*!

And guess what?! Sunlight's the best disinfectant, you vampire jerks!



We *save* people! That's what we *do*! And we're gonna keep on saving people until there isn't anyone left who needs saving! Humans are *off the menu*, you hear me?



Go bite each other for all I care! Or cows! Maybe feed on cows!

Only you won't have a chance because *Reed* is gonna *solve this* any second now!



Also, don't feed on cows-- we don't need vampire cows running around! And don't feed on any birds either! In fact, forget I mentioned both those ideas!

Uh--Uncle Johnny...?



Go back to sleep, buddy, we're good. Just had to teach some vampires who thought they'd sneak past the *eye* of the *Storm* a lesson.

How long were you sitting on that line, Johnny?

Shh. Sleep, Sis. I'll have *plenty* more zingers when you wake.





This, Alicia--
--assuming
it *works*--

--is a *cellular
resonator*.

I'm
listening.



I'm far outside
the boundaries of
peer-reviewed science,
but it *seems* reasonable
that vampirically infected
cells--"undead" in the
common parlance--are
materially changed
from living ones.

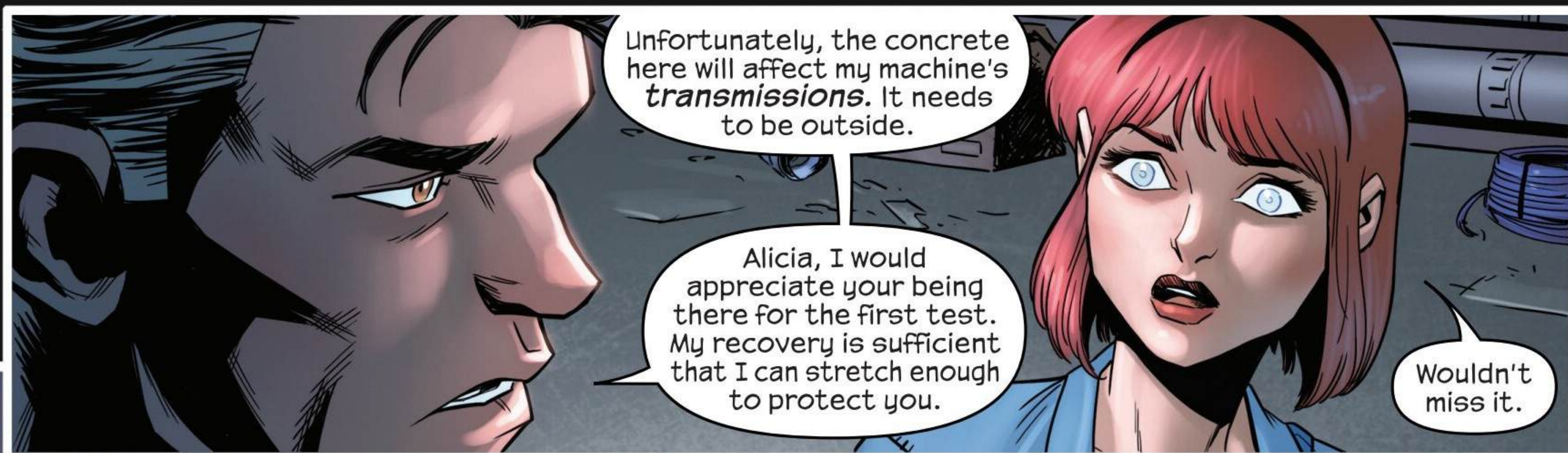
And that
means they may--
may--have a
different frequency
of *mechanical
resonance*.



So this
causes infected
cells to *vibrate*
but leaves normal
ones alone.

Arresting
any further
infection--precisely.
Honestly, it's just a
theory that fits
the facts.

However,
it is a theory
that can be
tested.



Unfortunately, the concrete
here will affect my machine's
transmissions. It needs
to be outside.

Alicia, I would
appreciate your being
there for the first test.
My recovery is sufficient
that I can stretch enough
to protect you.

Wouldn't
miss it.

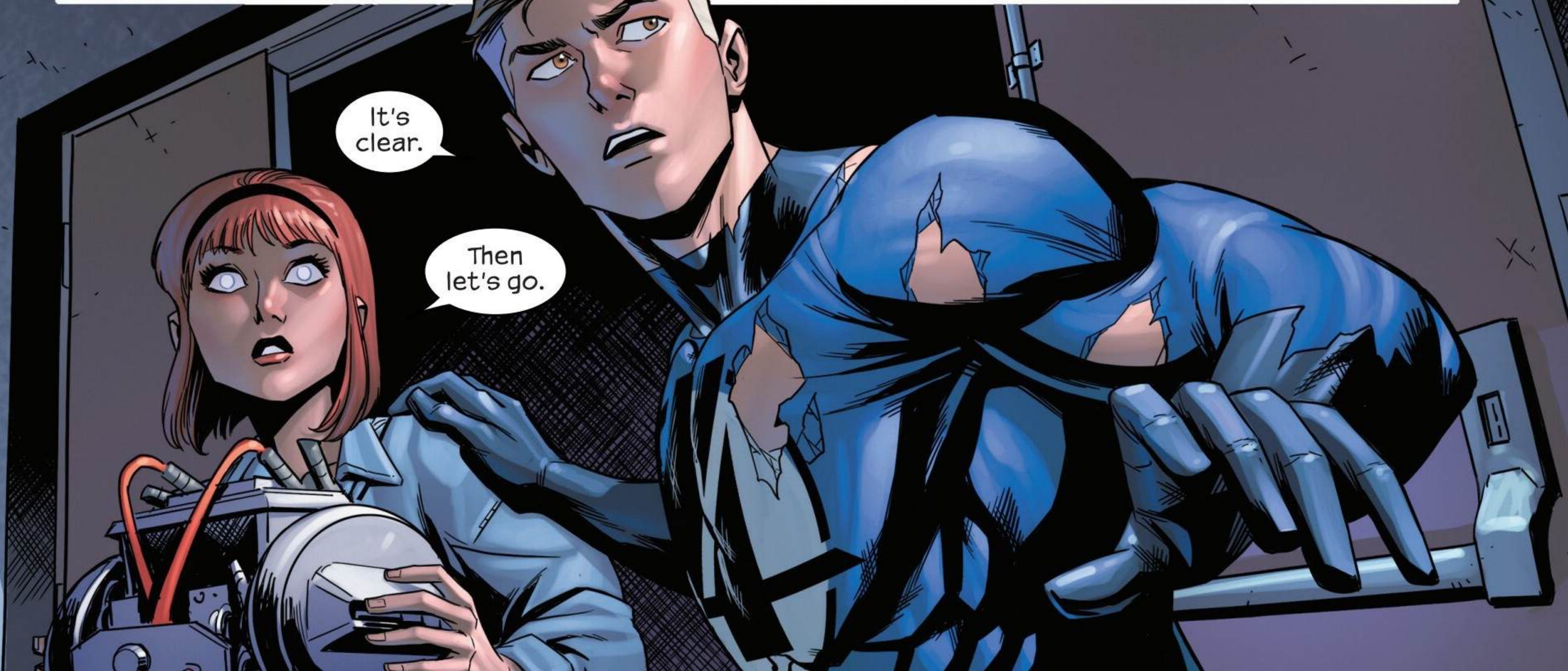
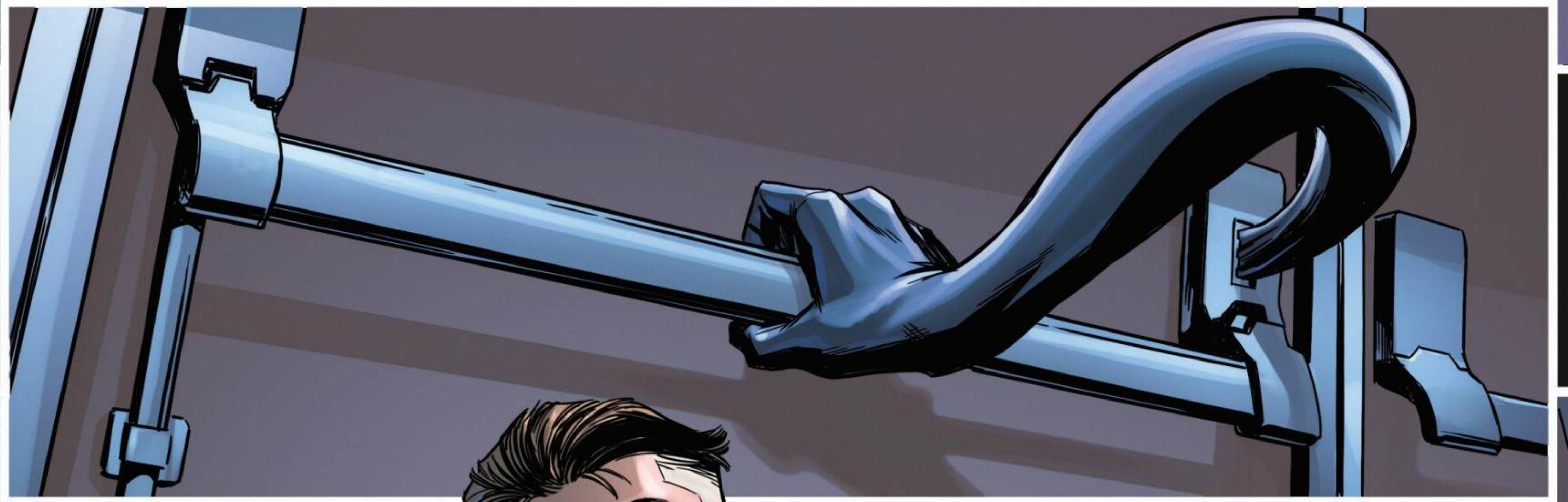
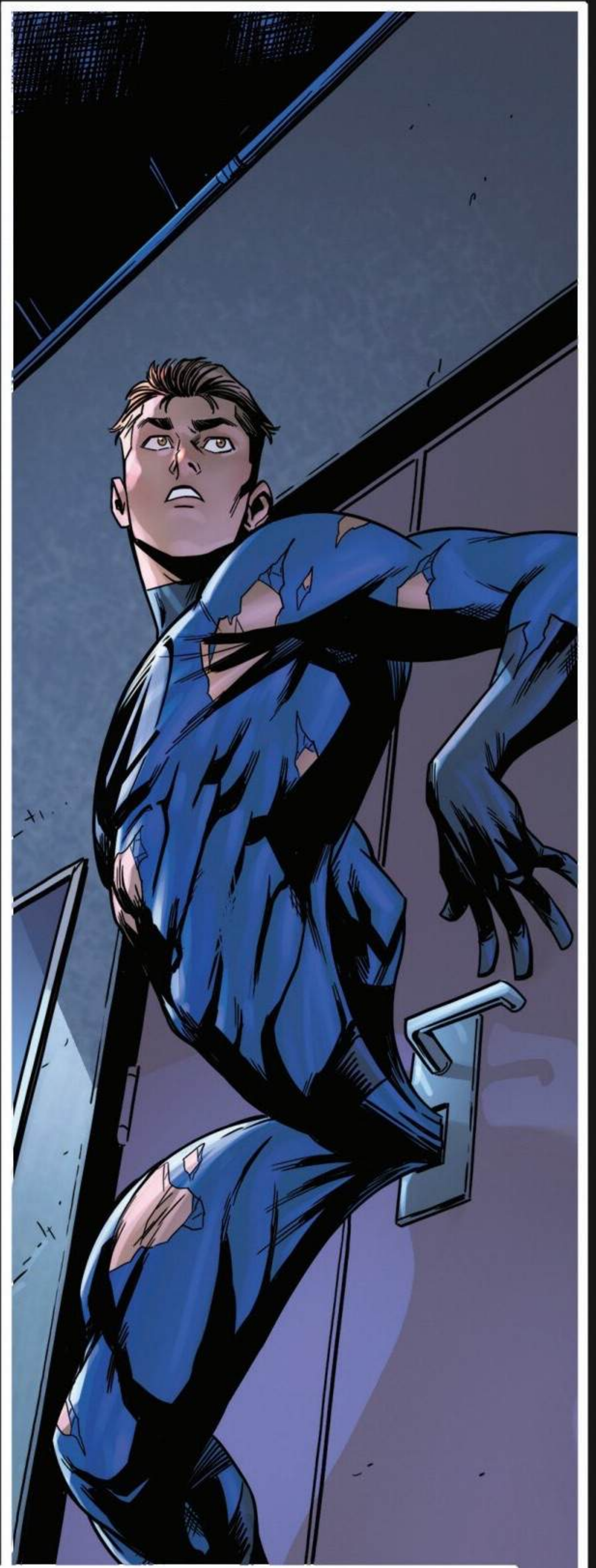


We're going to be back shortly.
Is anyone here familiar with the
Fibonacci sequence?

Uh,
yeah?

Then you're in charge of the door:
I'll knock the first eight numbers
when we return.

Don't open
it for anyone
else.

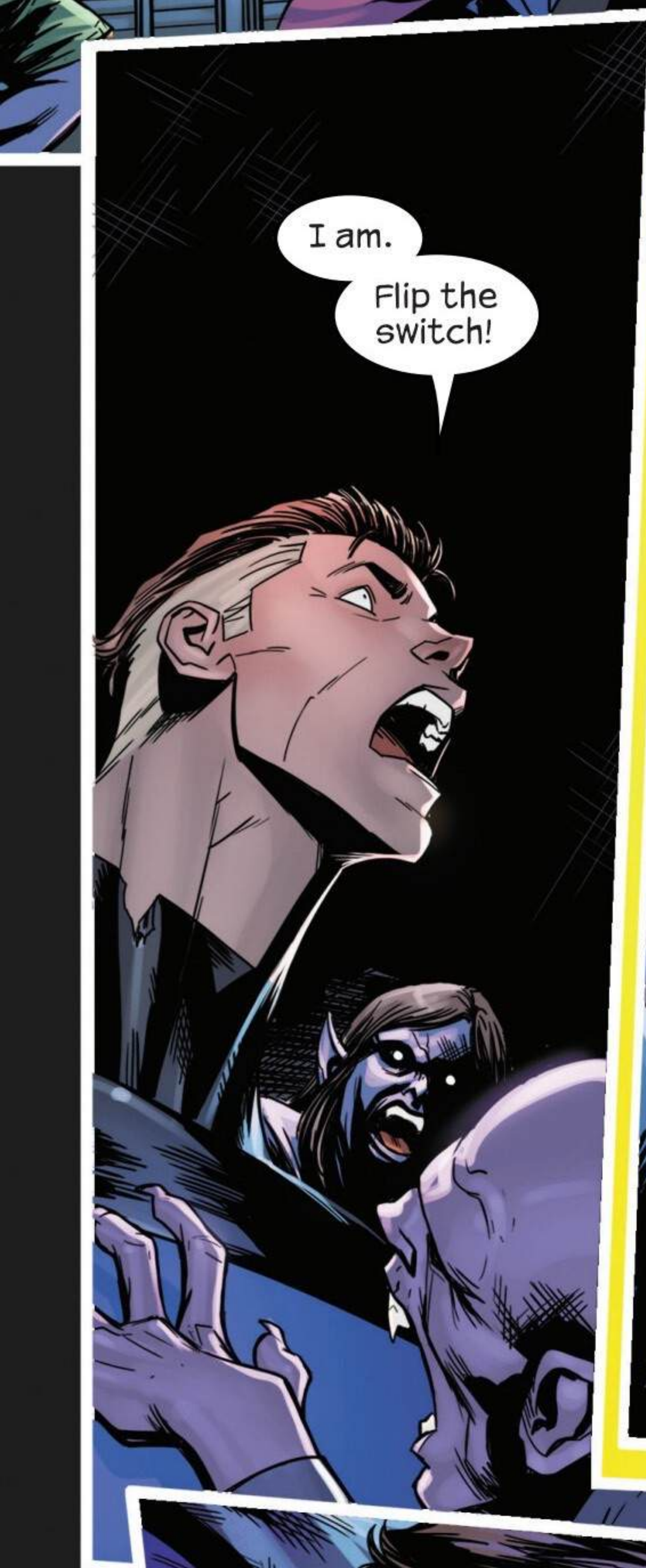




Okay.
We're outside,
Alicia.

I noticed--
the ground
changed from smooth
tile to rougher
pavement.

Ready
for your first
experiment?



I am.
Flip the
switch!

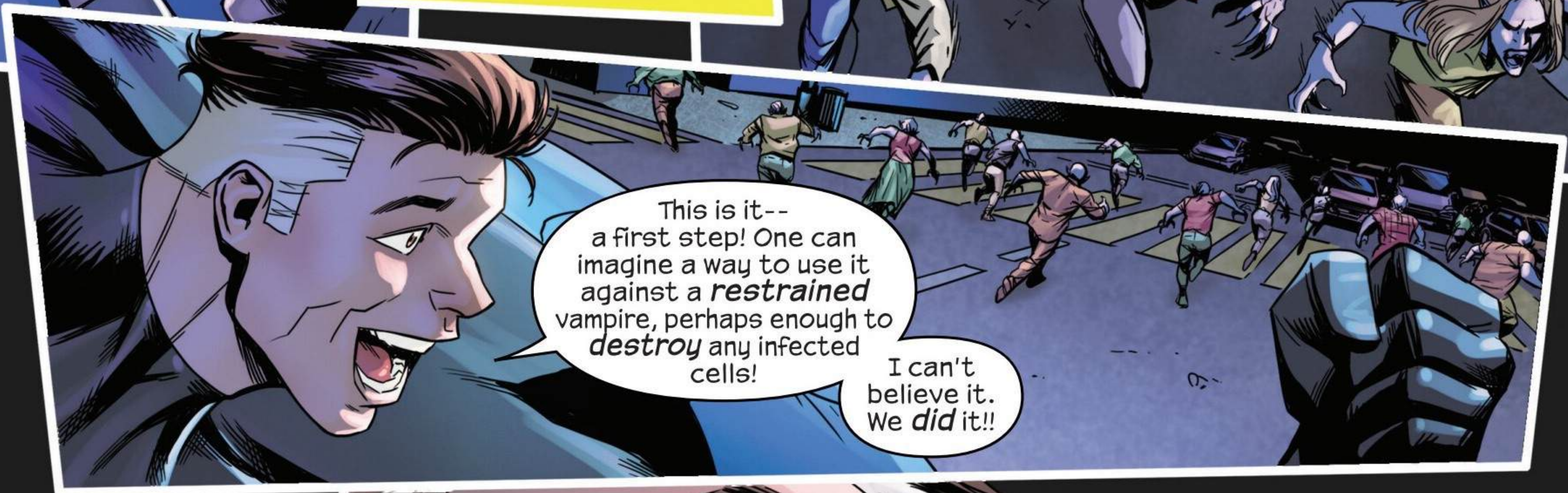


KLIK



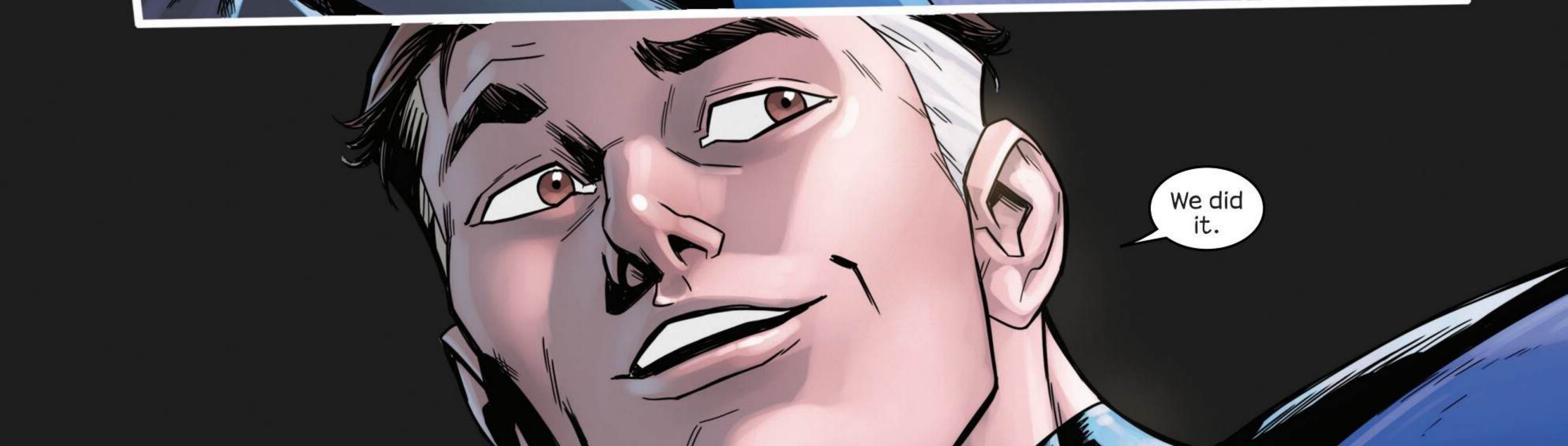
It's working!
Alicia, it's
working!

It's
repulsing the
vampires!!



This is it--
a first step! One can
imagine a way to use it
against a *restrained*
vampire, perhaps enough to
destroy any infected
cells!

I can't
believe it.
We *did* it!!



We did
it.



I knew you could do it, bud. What's the next step?

More experiments, certainly, and we'll have to find a way to target it--*and* to scale it up. We--

Wait. Something doesn't make sense.



Reed?

The skies are clearing too.

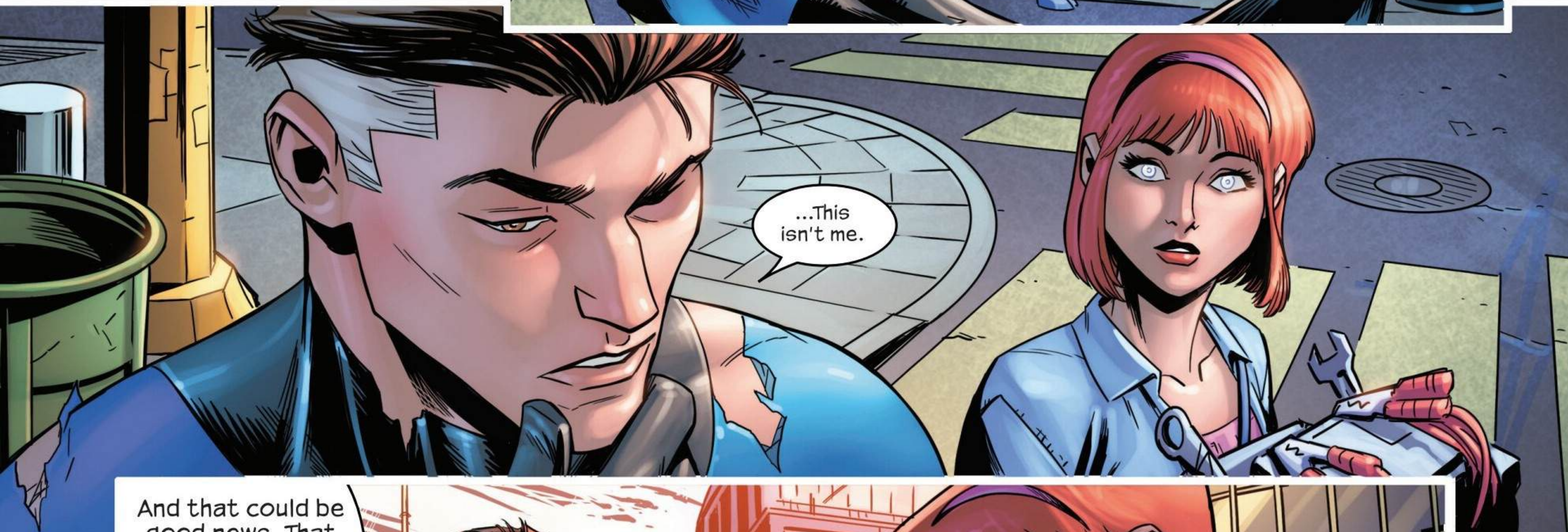
That's good, isn't it?

Yes, but my resonator shouldn't be able to *affect* that, even if it *could* reach that far--the inverse-square law *has* to apply...



What I built should *only* be enough to hold infection at bay, *locally* and at the *cellular* level--and that's in the best case. Things are *reversing*, Alicia. That's not possible.

I couldn't-- it can't--



...This isn't me.

And that could be good news. That could actually be *great news*. Alicia, could you turn off the cellular resonator, please?



KLIK

Done.



Nothing's *changed*. The skies are still *clearing*!

I can feel it-- the sun's on my face! The clouds are gone? This is *over*?

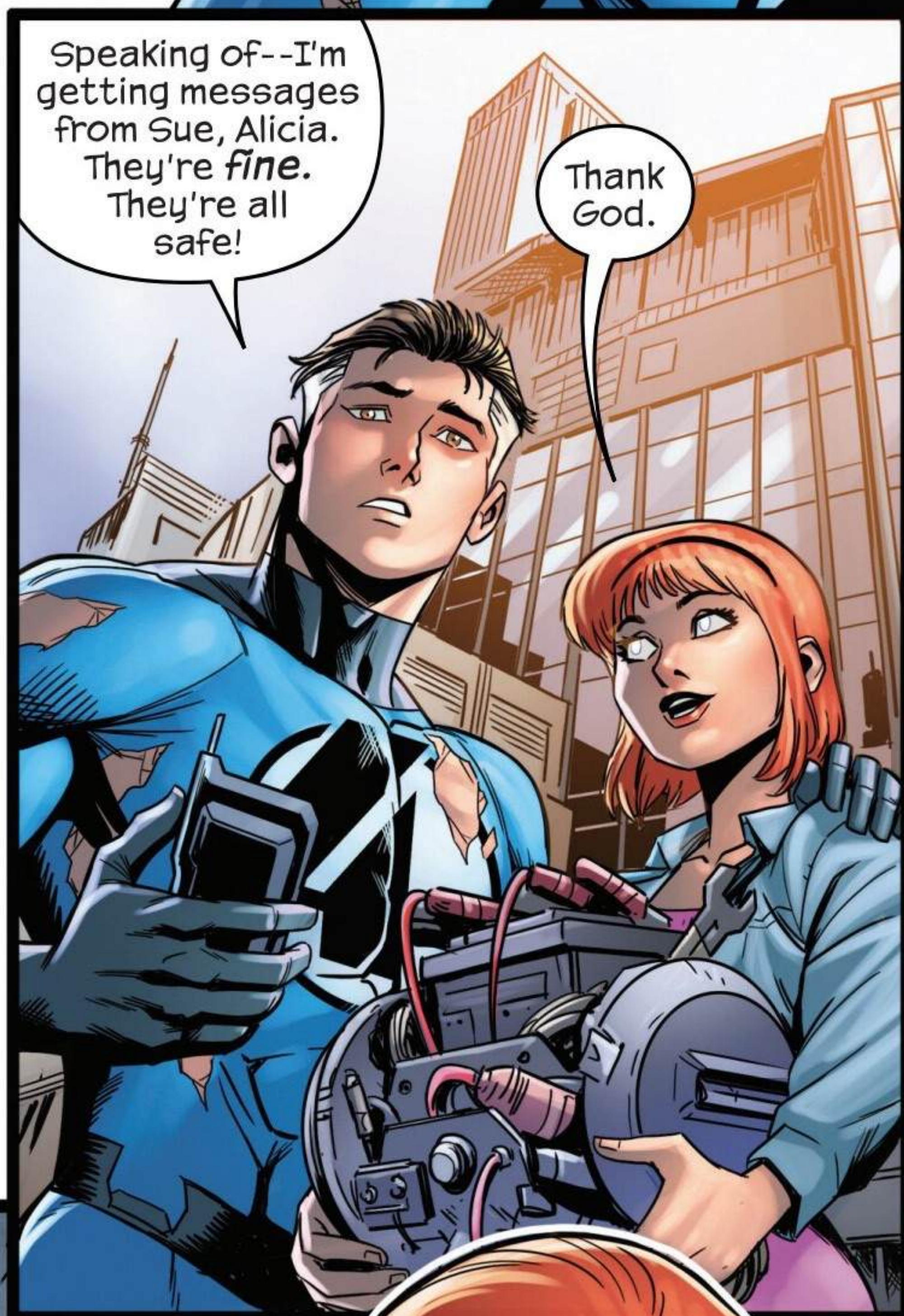
Yes! Yes, I believe it is!



And we didn't *do* it-- someone *else* solved the problem! Incredible. *Fantastic*!

I wonder who it was--a worldwide event *could* involve anyone. Sue? Johnny?

...Tony?



Speaking of--I'm getting messages from Sue, Alicia. They're *fine*. They're all safe!

Thank God.



But then comes a voice, one I'll find out later is coming from every speaker and screen on the planet--even those that are *powered off*.

Your attention, please: The vampire threat is over, and this world--*our* world--is *safe* once more.

Of course I *recognize* the speaker--how could I not? And as I do...

...the Earth *tilts* beneath my feet.

And you have but one man to thank: Earth's new, superior Sorcerer Supreme...

No!

It can't be. It *can't*.

...Victor Von Doom.

Doom, a humble king of a small nation, has saved you where all other heroes failed. And Doom **alone** gives you your **freedom** back-- your **peace**-- your **prosperity**.

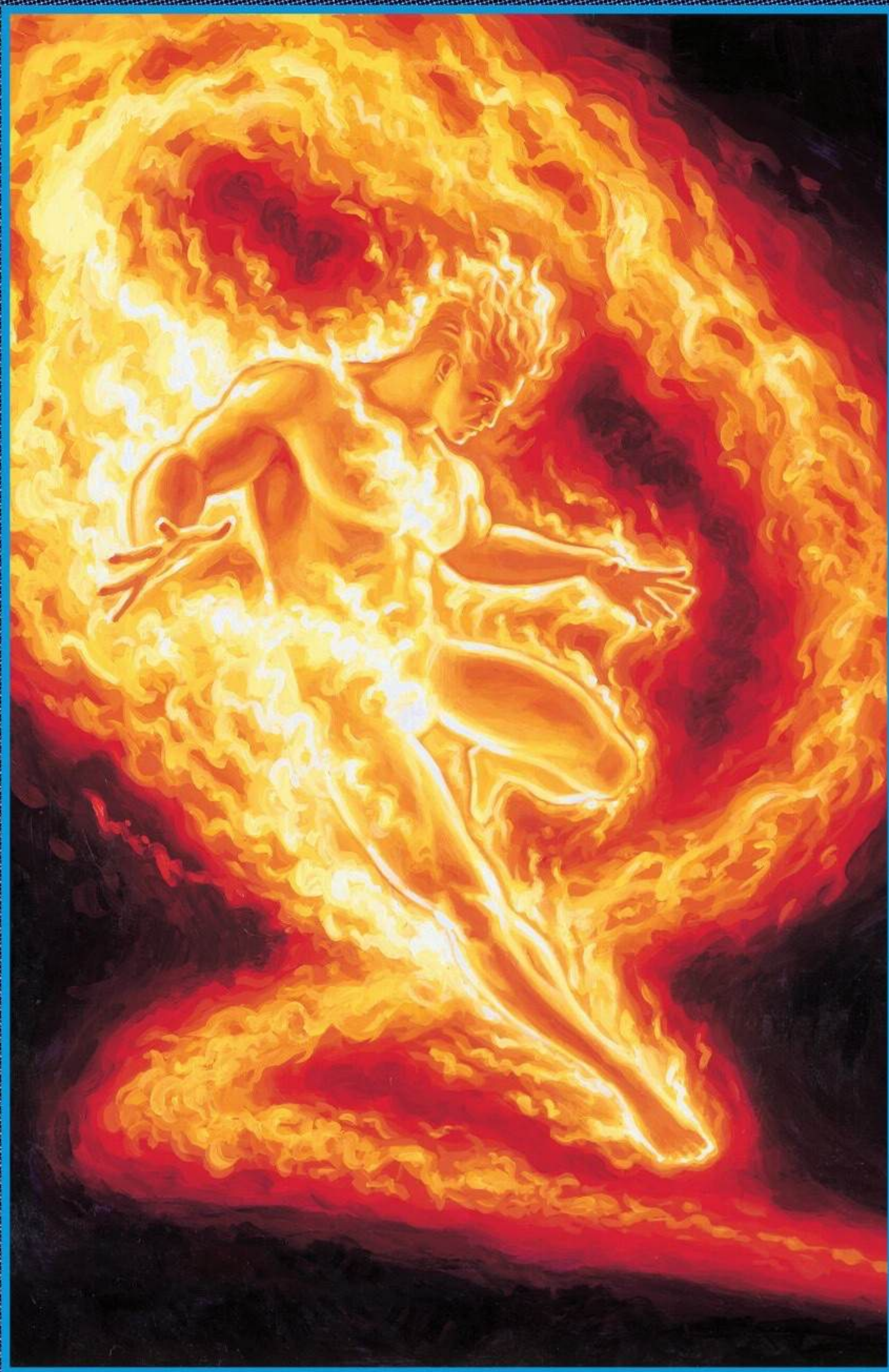
And as he now assumes his new mantle as Earth's protector against all enemies, magical or mystical...



...Doom will have much to announce very, very soon.

...@#%\$.

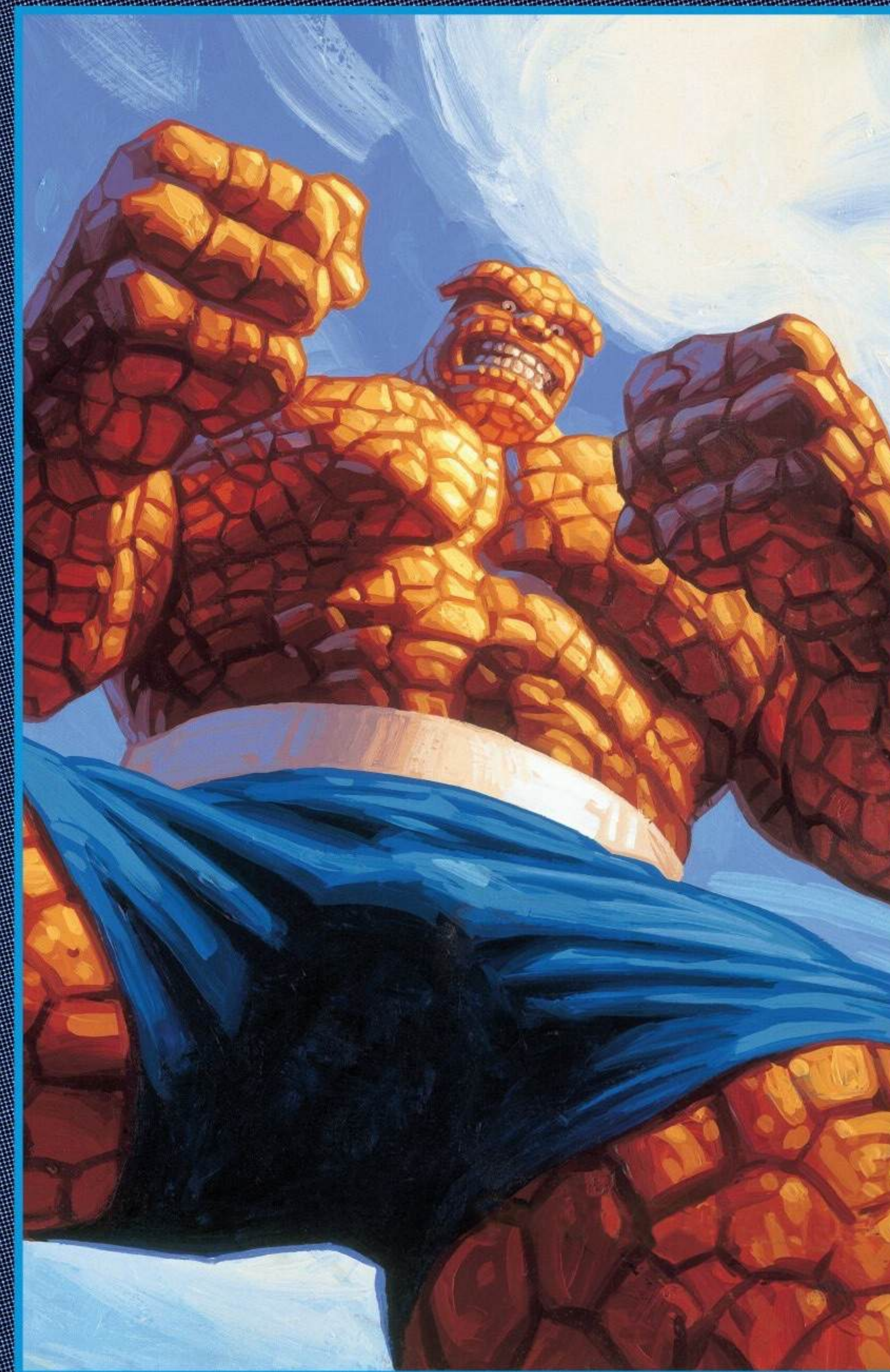
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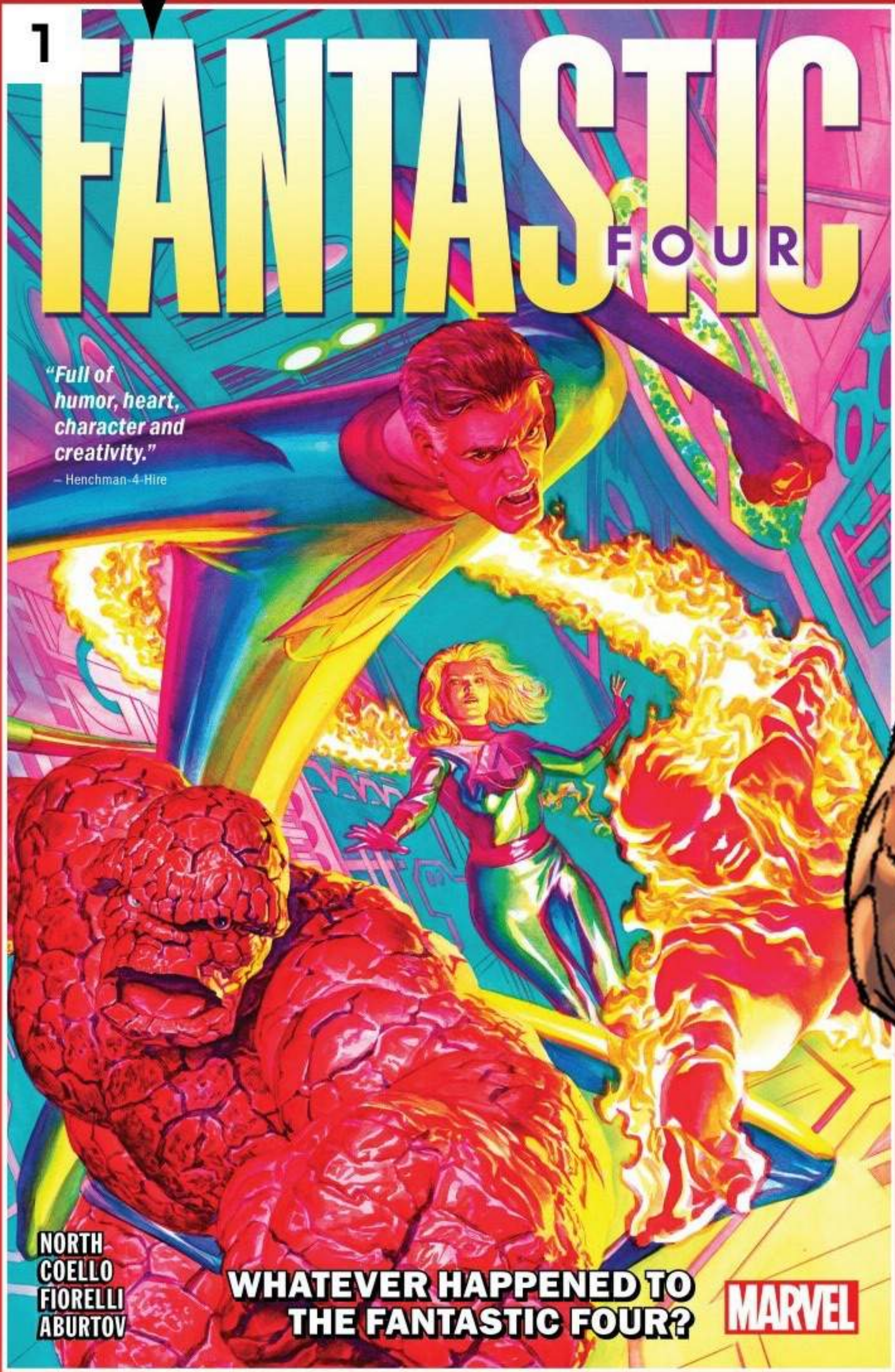
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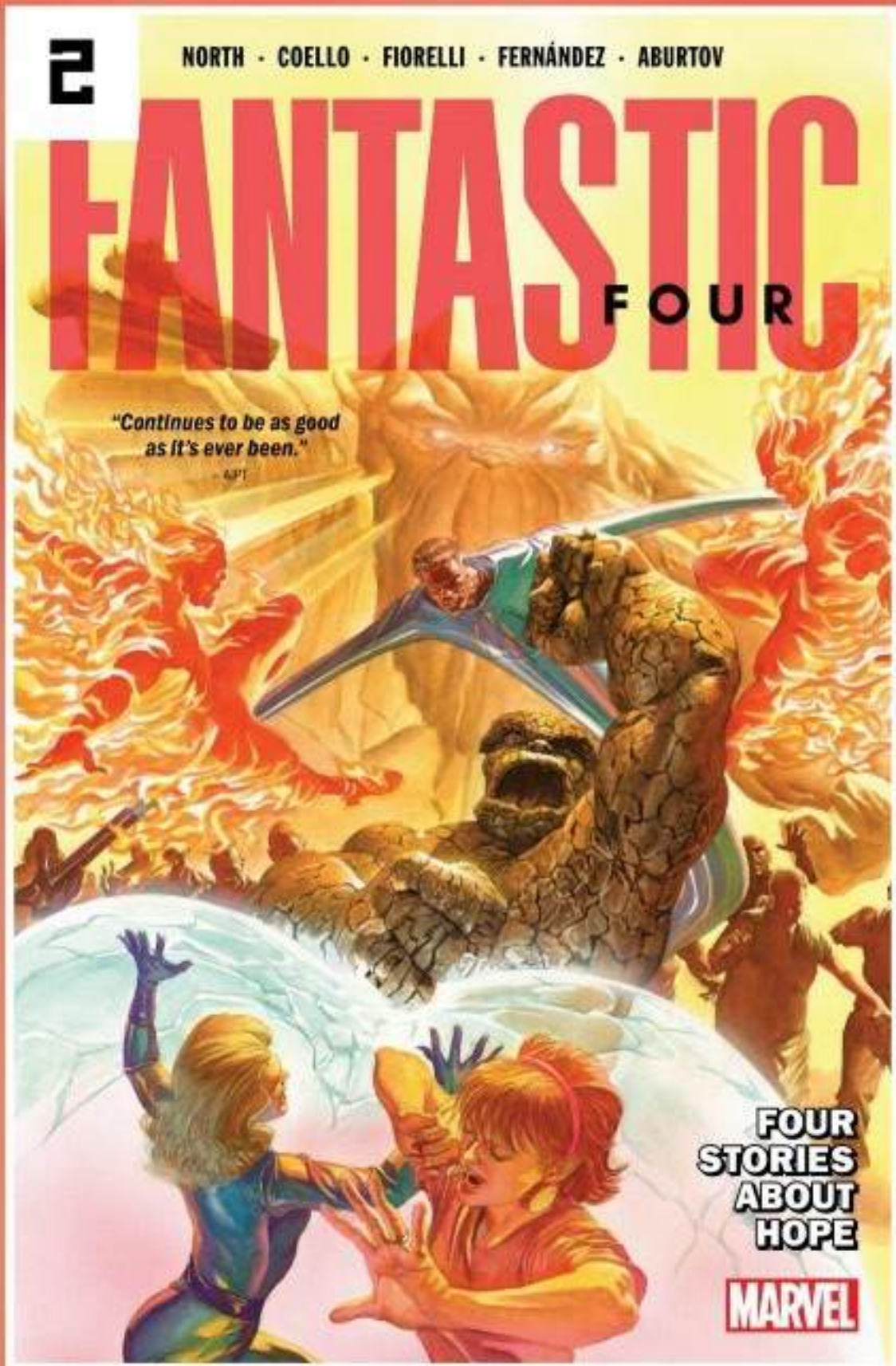
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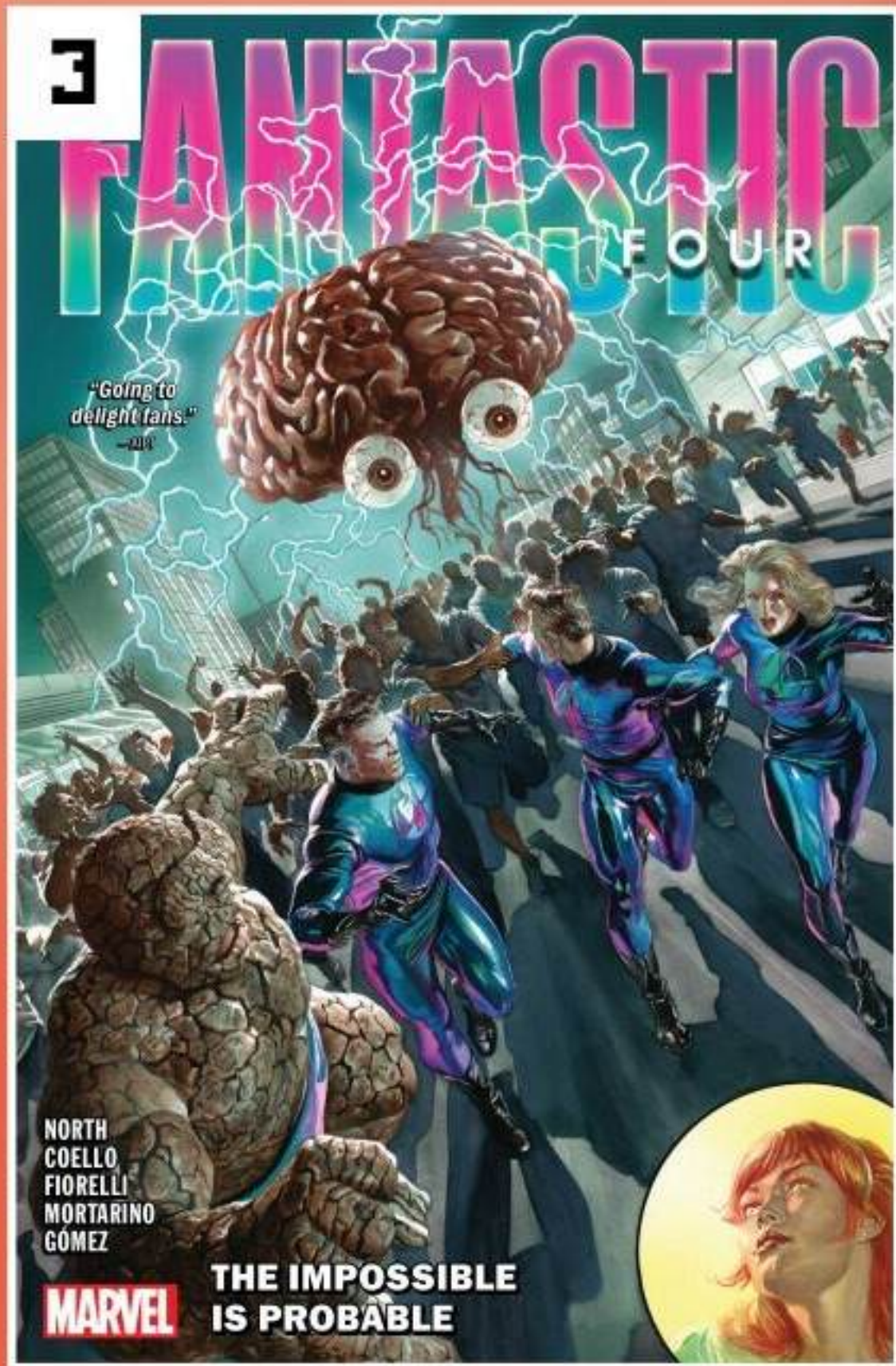
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